ORAL POETRY IN ALBANIAN AND OTHER BALKAN CULTURES:

TRANSLATING THE LABYRINTHS OF UNTRANSLATABILITY

by

Gjeke Marinaj

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TRANSLATING THE LABYRINTHS OF UNTRANSLATABILITY

by

GJEKE MARINAJ, BA, MA

DISSERTATION

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ORAL POETRY IN ALBANIAN AND OTHER BALKAN CULTURES:

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This dissertation features a thorough collection of the oral poetry of Albania translated into English. The oral poets and performers are placed in their linguistic and cultural environments to illuminate the creative nature of these poems. The presentation is introduced by a detailed analysis addressing the problems of translating oral poetry. First, I place the Albanian oral poems in their historical, geographical, and aesthetic contexts, and then I discuss the problems encountered in the translation of each poem. In the reconstruction of the translation process, I paid close attention to the difficulties in finding the English equivalent of Albanian poetry's linguistic, rhythmic, cultural, and stylistic features. I was also keenly interested in showing the limitations of translating poetry from Albanian, since the grammatical and syntactical structures of the Albanian language are far removed from those in English. Albanian literature is not well known in the English-speaking world; therefore, I considered it important to place each poem in its cultural, historical, and social context. In my translations, I tried to re-create the meter,

rhythm, rhyme, and sounds of the original Albanian poems to bring them a new life in English. Albanian oral poetry includes an enormous variety: patriotic songs; pastorals; heroic tales; the epic matter of Muji; poems on courtship, flirtation, and love; marriage songs; spells, charms, and games; hymns and rituals; and deep philosophical reflections. My study of Albania's oral poetry is the first of its kind to appear in the English-speaking world. I hope that these translations will inspire further discussion and analysis, and take a major step toward reviving interest in Albanian literature.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS v

ABSTRACT vi

LIST OF FIGURES xi

CHAPTER 1 ALBANIAN ORAL POETRY AS NATIONAL IDENTITY 1

1.1 THE EPIC MUSE 2

1.2 THE SURVIVAL OF ALBANIAN POETRY AND LANGUAGE 5

1.3 WHO ARE THE ALBANIANS? 7

1.4 ON THE ANTIQUITY OF THE ILLYRIAN ORAL TRADITION 16

1.5 BALKAN VIOLENCE AND THE ROLE OF THE POETS 19

1.6 SONGS OF THE KRESHNIKS 25

1.7 EPIC STORY AND EPIC CYCLE 28

1.8 FOLK SONG: A DIRGE IN ILLYRIA 31

1.9 FOLK SONG: A WEDDING IN DAJÇ 36

CHAPTER 2 THE RECONSTRUCTION OF THE TRANSLATION PROCESS 41

CHAPTER 3 THE POEMS 59

PATRIOTIC SONGS 59

3.1 HOMAGE TO THE WARRIORS 59

3.2 THE EAGLE OF ALBANIA 61

3.3 THE PLEDGE OF THE HILL-FOLK 62

3.4 THE CURSE 63

3.5 IN THE MOUNTAINS OF TARAMIS 64

3.6 MY HOME VILLAGE 67

3.7 MILKING-TIME 68

3.8 CHEESE 69

3.9 BUTTER 70
3.10 SHEPHERD'S SONG 71
3.11 THE PROUD ROOSTER 73
HEROIC TALES 75
3.12 DEDË LUL TOMA 75
3.13 KOLË'S PEERLESS WOMEN 78
3.14 YLBER 80
3.15 WORD SPREADS IN ISTANBUL 93
3.16 ZEK JAKINI 95
3.17 SUNG ACROSS THE SHOULDER 98
THE EPIC MATTER OF MUJI 100
3.18 THE MARRIAGE OF HAJKUNA 100
3.19 MUJI AND THE THREE WITCHES 106
COURTSHIP, FLIRTATION, AND LOVE 116
3.20 "SWEET, WHERE WERE YOU LINGERING?" 116
3.21 "WHERE SHALL WE MEET?" 118
3.22 BEAUTY WITH A WHITE SHAWL 120
3.23 "MILLER, MILLER" 121
3.24 TWO BEAUTIES 123
3.25 BEAUTY AT THE DOOR 125
3.26 "HEY, GIRL" 126
3.27 "HEY, BEAUTIFUL!" 128
MARRIAGE SONGS 130
3.28 TO THE BRIDE 130
3.29 THE COCK AND THE BRIDE 131
3.30 SHE WHISPERS TO HER LOVER 133
3.31 POOR HYSEN 135
3.32 MARTA GOSSIPS 137
SPELLS, CHARMS, AND GAMES 138
3.33 A CHARM AGAINST SNAKEBITE 138
3.34 SONG OF THE SALT 139

3.35 CURING A BUNION........140
3.36 HOST AND GUEST........141
3.37 HAT SONG........143
LULLABIES........144
3.38 NINA-NANA, MY FATIME........144
3.39 NINA-NANA, MY ONLY BOY........145
3.40 NINA-NANA, BABY GIRL........146
3.41 NINA-NANA, MY SICK CHILD........148
DANCE SONGS........150
3.42 THE WAR DANCE........150
3.43 THE MILKING DANCE........151
3.44 THE HANDKERCHIEF OF THE BACHELOR DANCE........152
3.45 THE MEADOW DANCE........153
HYMNS AND RITUALS........155
3.46 THE BIRTHDAY OF SAINT NICHOLAS........155
3.47 THE BLESSED VIRGIN........157
3.48 TO THE CHRISTIAN PRIEST........158
3.49 EIGHT BAD EGGS........159
3.50 CONFESSION TO GOD........160
3.51 LAMENT FOR PRENG GRUDA........162
PHILOSOPHY........166
3.52 LET YOUR WORK BE WELL OR ILL…........166
3.53 WHAT IS WITHIN A MAN........168

CHAPTER 4 THE RECORDINGS........169

CHAPTER 5 THE ORAL POETS AND PERFORMERS........176

BIBLIOGRAPHY........198

VITA

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 5.1 Noc Tom DEDAJ 176

Figure 5.2 Jonuz DELAJ..177

Figure 5.3 Pashko GJEKAJ 178

Figure 5.4 Luxhe GJELOSHJA 179

Figure 5.5 Gjok GOJÇAJ with wife Djella..180

Figure 5.6 Dakë KEQAJ 181

Figure 5.7 Klarko KOÇI 182

Figure 5.8 Pjeter Gjokë KODRA..183

Figure 5.9 Zef LEKA..184

Figure 5.10 Jaho Salih MARGJEKA..185

Figure 5.11 Nik Palok MARINAJ 186

Figure 5.12 Zef MARINAJ..187

Figure 5.13 Marash MARKU 188

Figure 5.14 Lulash Nikë PALUSHAJ 189

Figure 5.15 Dr. Miodrag RADULOVACKI..190

Figure 5.16 Llesh RUSHAJ 191

Figure 5.17 Dedë SHTËPIJA..192

Figure 5.18 Resmie SIQECA..193

Figure 5.19 Fran Zef THERÇAJ..194

Figure 5.20 Lush VUKELAJ 195

Figure 5.21 Vera ZEFI..196

Figure 5.22 Map of Malësia e Madhe: District within Albania 197

CHAPTER 1

ALBANIAN ORAL POETRY AS NATIONAL IDENTITY

This dissertation is meant to offer the English-language reader only a small part of Albanian oral poetry. What I offer here is truly essential to Albanian literature and culture, because there is no identity of a people more synonymous with the strength, spirit, and beauty of their own folk songs than that of the Albanians. The Albanian language, it has been argued, is the true distinction of the Albanian people. But it is their historic, legendary, and other lyric folk songs that have kept the language alive throughout their rich and complex history. Oral poetry, I believe, is not only poetry in its own right, but the root code of language itself. And true translation must continue and honor that process of language-making. “[T]his is even more important than a knowledge of the source language: a poet can make himself into some kind of scholar—or, failing that, can work with a scholar—but a scholar cannot make himself into any kind of poet if he is not one already.”[1]

Perhaps the most distinct characteristic of Albanian oral poetry is its esthetics, particularly, its imagery. The powerful presence of this poetry has inspired the people of Malësia e Madhe (a district in northern Albania with a population of 36,000 and an area of 344 mi^2 where most of these poems originate from) to believe that their oral verses are of shaping significance

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[1] Kussi, Matti, Keith Bosley, and Michael Branch. *Finnish Folk Poetry-Epic.* Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society, 1977. p 17.

for both their individual lives and their national experience. They have believed over the millennia that this oral poetry can keep their language alive, preserve their national identity, serve as medicine for their wounds and illnesses, record their achievements and embrace their heroes. Above all, they see it as a force that motivates them to hold on to their past and preserve their honor. In fact, these poems represent a poetic tradition of such influence that has not only shaped the culture of this region but also made a major impact on the development of Albanian poetry.

1.1 THE EPIC MUSE

There are three main branches of Albanian oral poetry: the historic songs, the legendary songs, and the songs of the folk. The historic songs, depending on the setting of the compositions, is also recognized by a variety of alternative names such as këngë trimërie (courage songs), këngë bjeshkësh (highland songs), këngë lahute (lute songs), lirika popullore (country lyrics), and këngë burrnie (songs of virility—in the sense of virtue or nobility). "Scholars are still uncertain at what point precisely the songs of Kosovo began to be sung. The octosyllabic poems emerging from a patriarchal village context were preceded by, and evidently for a while developed parallel to, the poems in lines of fourteen to sixteen syllables emerging from a feudal context in an urban Adriatic setting known as bugarstice."[2]

---

[2] Matthias, John, and Vladeta Vuckovic. *The Battle of Kosovo.* Athens: Ohio University Press, 1987. p 9.

As an integral part of the Albanian oral and literary tradition, the historic songs have created a cultural foundation that from century to century has translated into a significant source and trusted guide in the work of upholding the much-challenged Albanian national identity. Recording the historic events, costumes, and mores of the people with maximum accuracy, these songs were regarded as potent spells that go beyond the habitual mission of telling a story. The artistic expectations of the songs are parallel with those of the heroes they portray—those who often go beyond the mere fighting of battles, fighting with a sense of personal dignity and national honor. "Word Spreads in Istanbul" is one of many songs in this category:

Noc Mark Deda with this call
Curdles the peace of Istanbul:
"I'll not give up my guns alive,
My guns I'll not give up alive!
I'll wash the dales in blood that day
They come to take my guns away."
Young man with a double chin
Noc Mark's house would enter in;
His land's bony, the night is dark,
They beat the door of good Noc Mark.
Three deputies and one gendarme
Bellow at the sleeping farm:
"Noc Mark Deda, step outside,
Let's see your actions match your pride!
Orders our commandant gave:
Bring you in dead or alive."
"Give me five minutes more to sleep:
Tonight a holy night I keep."
Holy nights can swiftly pass:
Noc escapes, hides in his grass.
"God and St. Nicholas, may I
Survive their rage and see them die:
For my father I don't fear,
He is in his ninetieth year
And his time has come to die.
I'll avenge him—if not I,

Then my son or his son's son,
Till we've cut ten heads for one."

Yet the fundamental mission of the historic songs is even greater. To simply record the essential parts of people's historic wars, social events, family activities, personal achievements, and so on is not enough; they must be recorded and performed with the highest possible literary and artistic conduct. They are real songs that deal with historical events and real people. As such, the historical songs are oriented to deal with all the intense historical, political, and social issues, even when they escalate from local to national and, at times, to international levels of conflict. Albanian historical songs, even when they lack specific historical data, have a poetic depth that gives the audience or reader sufficient clues to arrive at educated conclusions.

Concrete in description and realistic in interpretation, the historical songs generally do not tamper with historic outcomes regardless of how they might affect the interests of the parties involved in the conflict or how the poet might feel personally about the whole ordeal under consideration. So it is not uncommon for the poets to include details about the date and time of a social or political event or the names and the ranks of the heroes involved in a battle, leaving it to the tone and other oral and literary devices to portray the nature of the excitement and the outcome of the events. "Kole's Peerless Women," for instance, is full of such details. In the first stanza (below), the reader is introduced to the perceived character of Gjin Nika, the nature of actions, the name of the victim, and more:

Mountain-man, young Gjin Ndreca,
Long had been a troublemaker.
Now he raided Kolë Marku,
Broke the gate of Kolë Marku,

Broke into his sheepfold seeking
Anything thought worth his taking:
Copper sheep-bells from the rams,
Tender lambs beneath their dams,
Oxen from the manger's side,
Kole's son's new-wedded bride.

This sense of historical fact evaluated silently by a discerning judge holds true not only for the Albanian historic songs but for its Slavic neighbors as well. They "are characterized by high sensitivity, artistic flair, concern for the meaning of man's existence on earth despite the poet's pronounced aloofness, by the strong musicality of his verses, and, above all, by consummate craftsmanship."[3]

1.2 THE SURVIVAL OF ALBANIAN POETRY AND LANGUAGE

Actually, the worst thing that ever happened to the epic poetry of the Balkans was its division into ethnic groups. Epic poetry is better explained and understood in linguistic terms. The Albanian language is itself distinct, with its own history. It has an integrity that is as unique as most recognized branches of the other Indo-European languages. There is no question among linguists about that. Poetry is language and language is poetry. What keeps languages alive is precisely the poets.

---

[3] Dučič, Jovan. *Blue Legends.* Translated by Vasa D. Mihailovich. Columbus: Kosovo Publishing Company, 1983. p x.

It has always been that way. Languages die, in part, because they do not have a great tradition of poetry in them. When it has a great tradition of poetry in it, the language stays alive even if the language is spoken by people who have very little trace of biological, racial, or ethnic connection to a particular geographical area. Language holds a very powerful role in the betterment of a nation's life, and when it is infused with the art of poetry, it can do cultural wonders, regardless of its geographical boundaries. Here is a good example, not from Albanian literature and culture, but from the history of Czech literature: "When Czech literature emerges into the full light of day, one finds not primitive beginnings, but a highly developed literary situation in which Czech poets and scholars, accustomed to write in the international languages of church and state, to an increasing extent began to compose in their native tongue, bringing it to a cultural maturity that was the product of a long literary tradition."[4]

Much the same could be said of Albanian literature. For thousands of years, in "the land of the eagles," as Albanians have nicknamed their country, the songs of the *lahuta* (a single-stringed instrument) have played a unique moral and physiological role. The lines taken from "Homage to the Warriors" clearly illustrate that:

When I take my lute to sing
Snow-peaks perch upon my string,
And the forest heights fall still
And the starry heavens chill
And the ice-fields and the crests
Come to sing the heroes' gests.
Words like water from the spring

---

[4] Matejka, Ladislav, J. Mersereau, and D. Welsh. *Czech Poetry A Bilingual Anthology.* Vol. I. University of Michigan, 1973. p 19.

Teach the heroes' deeds to sing;
Green-clad hillsides raise the call
Echoed from the mountain-wall.

These songs also show the reasoning of the people of Malësia e Madhe when they claim that their oral poems, këngët Kreshnike (the Kreshinik songs), "make men stronger, braver; give courage to endure the bullet, the blood, the wars where the men are lost."[5]

1.3 WHO ARE THE ALBANIANS?

This question is important because the whole notion of national identity with respect to Albania's neighboring countries is a relatively new issue for Albania and its people. Regardless of their embryonic origin, they found themselves in Illyria, and Illyria is what they called their homeland. If foreigners knocked on their doors and the reasons of their visits were pleasure, they did the best they could to entertain them as guests. If they were there for business, they made their goods, ports, and seashores available to them. If they came to occupy their land or kick them out of their own territory, they built gigantic castles like that of Rozafat, an Illyrian fortification, and fought with everything in their possession to never have to resettle elsewhere. Even when they had no alphabet—though as early as 1689 Albanian historians discovered a

[5] Sako, Zihni, and Qemal Haxhihasani. Folklor Shqiptar, Epika Legjendare. Vol. II. Tirana: Instituti I Folklorit, 1966. p 10.

letter “written in the old northern alphabet” [6] —they had their language and their folk songs, two important components that made them feel comfortable as a distinct Illyrian people.

Even as the transition from calling themselves Illyrians to being self-identified as Albanians took place, they protected their language, poetry, and territory without feeling the need to prove their national identity to anyone. In 1389, when the Battle of Kosovo started, they had no compunction about joining the Serbs and other nations to create a coalition of Balkan forces, and fought against the Ottoman Sultan Murat I. These identity issues led some Albanian writers like Marin Barleti (1450–1520) to utilize a defensive tone in their writings:

> There might be people who will tell me that: These are old issues. I know that as well, but the older they are the more divine they appear to be: all these great merits gain dignity, importance, and authority, and, if you will, some kind of religious honor analogous to the elderly who day in and day out keep getting older, and we honor them at the same rate, which is in contrast with our contemporaries; although our love toward them seems to be sweeter, we somehow tend to respect them less; similarly, the old good deeds hold more importance than the new ones even though the newer they are the sweeter they are.[7]

If the truth be told, it was a number of prominent non-Albanians, among them William Shakespeare, Lord Byron, and British traveler-writer Mary Edith Durham, who did the work of identification for them. In Act I, scene ii of Shakespeare’s comedy *Twelfth Night* or *What You Will* (written between 1600 and 1602 and published in 1623), the heroine Viola asks a captain and a small group of sailors: “What country, friends, is this?” and the captain responds “This is

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[6] Shuteriqi, Dimitër S. *Shkrimet Shqipe në Viete 1332-1850.* Prishtina: Rilindja, 1978. p 5
[7] Barleti, Marin. *Rrethimi I Shkodrës.* Tirana: Kombinati Poligrafik, 1982. p 149.

Illyria, lady." Viola asks again: "And what should I do in Illyria?" And the action of the play thenceforth is set in that real but also imaginary country.

Lord Byron's letter to his mother sent from Prevesa on November 12, 1809, and his excitement about meeting with Albanian people and their leader Ali Pasha Tepelena (1740–1822) have proved to be important to the Albanians and interesting to the other parts of the world. Here is the first paragraph of the letter:

> *My dear Mother,*
>
> *I have now been some time in Turkey. The place is on the coast but I have traversed the interior of the province of Albania on a visit to the Pacha. I left Malta in the Spider, a brig of war, on the 21st of September and arrived in eight days at Prevesa. I thence have been about 150 miles as far as Tepaleen, his highness' country palace, where I staid three days. The name of the Pacha is Ali, and he is considered a man of the first abilities, he governs the whole of Albania (the ancient Illyricum), Epirus and part of Macedonia. His son Velly Pacha, to whom he has given me letters, governs the Morea and he has great influence in Egypt, in short he is one of the most powerful men in the Ottoman empire. When I reached Yanina the capital after a journey of three days over the mountains through country of the most picturesque beauty, I found that Ali Pacha was with his army in Illyricum besieging Ibraham Pacha in the castle of Berat. He had heard that an Englishman of rank was in his dominion and had left orders in Yanina with the Commandant to provide a house and supply me with every kind of necessary, gratis, and though I have been allowed to make presents to the slaves etc. I have not been permitted to pay for a single article of household consumption. I rode out on the vizier's horses and saw the palaces of himself and grandsons; they are splendid but too much ornamented with silk and gold. I then went over the mountains through Zitza, a village with a Greek monastery (where I slept on my return) in the most beautiful situation (always excepting Cintra in Portugal) I ever beheld. In nine days I reached Tepaleen, our journey was much prolonged by the torrents that had fallen from the mountains and intersected the roads. I shall never forget the singular scene on entering Tepaleen at five in the afternoon as the sun was going down, it brought to my recollection (with some change of dress however) Scott's description of Branksome Castle in his lay, and the feudal system.*[8]

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[8] See www. albanianliterature.com.

Edith Durham's comment is famous: "Empires came and went, and passed over the Albanian as does water off a duck's back."[9] She describes the folk of that region as "A fierce tribal people, known as Illyrians," who "in about 300 B.C. were invaded by the Celts, who have probably left a deep mark on the people of to-day by the infusion of Celtic blood."[10] Her book *High Albania* is one of the most frequently referenced books on the topic of Albanian identity. Many other photographers, anthropologists, ethnographers, historians, and traveling writers, of course, expressed similar thoughts, for all of which the Albanian people were and remain grateful.

But all that research, professional determination, and human kindness started to backfire, not only on them but also on the Albanian people and their ancient history. From the first decades of the twentieth century to the present day, regardless of the voluminous new findings of contemporary scholarship, the debate over Albanian identity still seems to bounce from one extreme to the other. Some Albanian scholars, clerics, and historians insist (without mentioning a single specific Serbian name) that a number of Serbian scholars, who seem to be irritated by the whole notion of the debate, have argued against all the above. According to some Serbian scholars, the link that connects the modern Albanians with the Illyrians is simply a myth cleverly created by the Albanians themselves in order to establish ethnic and territorial priority. Some go even further, suggesting that the Albanians either are a race of Slavic origins or are Turks who have decided to stay after numerous Ottoman wars against the Balkan nations. Reading between the lines here, assuming these are indeed comments made by Serbs, it is not the Albanian people

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[9] Durham, Edith. *High Albania: A Victorian Traveler's Balkan Odyssey.* London: Phoenix Press, 2000. p 2

[10] Durham, p 4.

they have a problem with, because they are willing to consider that as part of their blood, but the fact that they consider themselves to be Illyrians.

That skepticism, as might be expected, never received acceptance, either by Albanian scholars or by international ones for that matter. The debate went on and to a degree still goes on, in three main directions. First and foremost, specific topographic names in Albanian considered as distinctly Illyrian were required as evidence. Second, the origin of the Albanian language has been questioned on the basis that, unlike Albanians, most ancient people have a well-known, or relatively known, ancient language. The third demand of the critics calls for a close examination of the history of Albanian literature. (At least literature is recognized by the debaters as an integral part of a people's identity.) The response of Albanian law has been to protect the language and literature as the most essential aspects of Albanian identity.

Some place the Illyrians, in the territory of modern Albania, as the first human population that ever existed in Europe:

> Thousands of years before the birth of Christ, when the Slavic tribes began their first westward stirrings, they presumably bore within their memory the patterned narratives or the formulaic verbalization to which the earliest poetry of the Balkan peoples might be traced. The first Slavs recognized in the west established a habitat in the region between the Vistula and Dnieper Rivers with the Avars, a migrant central Asian people, settled among them. Together the two began to migrate south and west into the Pannonian plain, and there they were joined by other Slavic tribes, among them the Sorbs (or "Serbs").[11]

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[11] Karadzic, Vuk. *Songs of the Serbian People.* Translated by Milne Holton, & Vasa D. Mihailovich. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1997. p 13.

Other scholars insist that the Paleolithic period is the best place to look for Albanian origins, but they give no specific topography as reference. Antonello Biagini, the author of *The History of Albanian: From the Beginning to the Present*, who also teaches Eastern European history at La Sapienza University in Rome, suggests that we should concentrate on this subject by considering two distinct assumptions: the first hypothesis is the Slavic origin of the people of the Balkans in general and of the Illyrian territory in particular (as, for instance, people who came from Western Poland); the second hypothesis confirms their Balkan autochthony.[12] According to Albanian and foreign historians and anthropologists, including Father Zef Valentini, some tribes of Malësia e Madhe, including that of Shkrel, came from the upper Balkan mountains, including Bosnia and Novi Pazer (a city located in Serbia, in the Raška district), as nomadic graziers during the early Middle Ages and settled first in Pulat and then spread out elsewhere in Malësia e Madhe. Yet the claims of Father Valentini and others who think like him, argues Dom Nikë Ukgjini, himself an important contemporary Catholic figure and writer, "should never be interpreted, as some Serb authors think, as meaning the tribes of Malësia e Madhe, such as Hoti, Kelmendi, Kastrati, and Gruda, had come from the northern areas of Bosnia during the eleventh and twelfth century and got Albanianized in these areas after their arrival."[13]

As we know now, the Albanian language is a distinct branch of the Indo-European languages: "It [Illyria] is the least-known and most interesting part of the Balkan Peninsula. The

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[12] Biagini, Antonelo. *Historia e Shqipëtarisë.* Milano: Bompiani, 1998. p 13.

[13] Ukgjini, Dom Nikë. *Shkreli Vështrim Historiko-Kulturor.* Shkodër: Gjergj Fishta , 1998. p 19.

people speak a language alleged to be more ancient than Greek."[14] The prominent Albanian scholar Dhimitër Shuteriqi states:

> In its embryonic stages the written Albanian language appeared mainly in private letter correspondences, in the official religious acts, and especially in the business-related documents used by a considerable number of people. Side notes of Buzuku's Missal show that the written Albanian language was used only in a few religious books. The full alphabet, handwritten by someone as a side note on one of the pages of the book, which is different from the one used by Buzuku, is an indication that more than one alphabet might have existed at that time, which proves a nonsporadic use of the language.[15]

As British contemporary scholar Noel Malcolm eloquently explains below, there was also a short-lived challenging hypothesis that the Albanians could be identified with the people of the Caucasus area, and therefore the Albanian language might be Caucasian as well:

> This Caucasian theory was first expounded by Renaissance humanists (such as Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini) who were familiar with the works of the classical geographers and historians; it was developed in the 1820s by the French diplomat and influential writer on the Balkans François Pouqueville; and in 1855 it was presented in a polemical response to the work of Johann Georg von Hahn by a Greek doctoral student at Göttingen, Nikolaos Nikokles. By the late nineteenth century this theory was in retreat, thanks to the work of linguists who had demonstrated that Albanian was definitely Indo-European, not Caucasian. One last attempt to salvage the theory, however, was made by an Arberësh writer, Francesco Tajani, who suggested that the Ur-Albanians were Scythians who spoke an Indian language but whose place of residence, before they moved to Albania, was in the Caucasus. With delightful ingenuity, Tajani derived the word shqiptar (Albanian) from the Sanskrit kship, meaning "to fight," and tar, meaning "bow"—thus demonstrating, to his own satisfaction at least, that the original Albanians were Scythian archers.[16]

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[14] Cozens-Hardy, W.H. "Montenegro and its Borderlands." *The Geographical Journal*, no. 5 (November 1894): 385. p 401.

[15] Shuteriqi, Dimitër S. Shkrimet Shqipe në Viete 1332-1850. Prishtina: Rilindja, 1978. p 4.

[16] Malcolm, Noel. Abanian Identities: Myth and History. Edited by Stephanie Schwandner-Sievers, & Bernd J. Fischer. Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2002. p 75.

Things have gotten so intense that, even today, poets and writers who happen to make comments on the Balkan languages and literature feel they must apologize to the reader, because no matter how objective and neutral their intentions might be, they know that it is almost impossible to make a comment of this nature that is acceptable to all Balkan readers. To illustrate this, I am offering the following passage taken from the preface by Milne Holton and Vasa D. Mihailovich to the collected poems of the Serbian linguist and song collector Vuk Stefanović Karadžić (1787—1864), *Songs of the Serbian People*, published by the University of Pittsburgh Press in 1997:

> In following the tradition of identifying our subject as "Serbian," we have certainly not desired to feed the flames of ethnic divisiveness that have so long ravaged the historical experience of the South Slavs. We are fully aware that the Croats, the Bosnians, the Macedonians, and the Bulgarians lay legitimate claim to their share of this body of poetry and to the history it embodies. We have called the poems "Serbian" in reference to a nation and its language, never to any modern state, yet we have done so in full recognition of the complex nature of the literary identity that existed in the minds of the collector and the singers whose work we present here.[17]

Questions about the Albanian language and literature are perfectly valid, but they always seem to generate more questions than answers. The ongoing debate wants answers for questions like: How do we place Albanian literature? In what category do we place it? It is not part of Greek literature, with which we are very familiar; equally clearly, it is not part of Slavic literature. We know that Albanian is the only language that belongs to the Illyric branch, just like the Thracian branch, which is also represented by a single modern language, the Armenian. The Albanians

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[17] Karadzic, Vuk. *Songs of the Serbian People.* Translated by Milne Holton, & Vasa D. Mihailovich. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1997. p xi.

know about the Celtic, Germanic, Latin, Slavic, Hellenic, Iranian, Indic, and the Tokharian branches, but in terms of literary production, the rest of the world knows very little about the Illyric/Albanian branch. This is important and relevant to the topic at hand, because it is a distinct strain of the Indo-European expansion and therefore a strong source of Albanian identity. Albanian scholars fully understood this language-literature concept. In an attempt to once again enjoy the peace of the earlier days in terms of Albanian identity, many Albanians, in addition to writing their own articles and academic essays, turned to the works of foreign scholars for help. Foreign writers were quoted on almost anything and everything they had to say about Albanian culture. The German historian Franz Altheim (1898–1976), who also studied philology, archaeology, and linguistics and lectured on these subjects at the University of Frankfurt, at the University of Halle, and the University of Berlin, was one of the people who were quoted frequently. He not only supported the idea that the Albanians are full-blooded Illyrians, but went even further, saying that "Towards the end of the thirteenth century B.C., the Illyrians earned for the first time an important place in world history."[18]

Canadian-born Robert Elsie is another Albanian scholar, who has earned the love and the respect of Albanian society in and outside of the country for his undisputed efforts to keep Albanian literature on the map of world literature. As a distinguished translator and scholar, Elsie has provided more specific evidence on behalf of the Albanian identity than arguably any non-Albanian ever has. Objective claims like the following: "The setting of the 'Songs of the Frontier Warriors' within the context of seventeenth-century border skirmishes during the Austro-Turkish

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[18] Spathari, Nikola. *Malësia e Madhe sic e njoha unë.* Shkodër: Idromeno, 2001. p 250.

wars perhaps constitutes, for its part, simply the crystallized literary form of much earlier Balkan legendry, predating the arrival of the Slavs" have had more effect on international opinion regarding this issue than all the government catalogs during the regime of Enver Hoxha combined.[19] I am not arguing here that all government-produced folkloric catalogs were worthless, but the propagandistic spin they utilized often sounded something like this: "The classics tell us of the ancient Illyrians, of their renowned war songs and their skillful playing on the flute, of their dances such as pyrrhike, which was famous in ancient times, and such Illyrian costumes as Dalmatica, which were to spread throughout the ancient world in the first century A.D."[20] By contrast, the evidence Elsie provides to support his arguments is concrete and appropriately chosen.

1.4 ON THE ANTIQUITY OF THE ILLYRIAN ORAL TRADITION

There is indirect textual evidence that folk songs in the Albanian language existed at least since 206 B.C.E. A few years back, after a valuable tip from a Chinese restaurant owner, who remembered his father talking about an old Albanian poem printed in a Chinese journal that was published in the United States in the late 1920s, I started to narrow down the Chinese

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[19] Eslie, Robert, and Janice Mathie-Heck. *Songs of Frontier Warriors.* Translated by Robert Elsie, & Janice Mathie-Heck. Wauconda: Bolchazy-Caducci Publishers, Inc., 2004. p 182-183.

[20] Zojsi, Rrok, Abaz Dojaka, and Hasan Qatipi. "Arti Popullor ne Shqiperi." Akademia e Shkencave te RPSh: Instituti i Historise, Sektori i Etnografise, 1976. p 2.

publications published in America from the 1920s to the 1950s. Only quite recently, however, with the kind assistance of Mary Yeh, PhD, was I able to locate the journal. I found the poem titled "The Son of King Bardhyl" in a literary supplement pamphlet placed in the Literature and Art section of the *China Journal*. The poem was translated from the Chinese into English in 1891 by Arthur Sowerby, who was probably the father of the editor of the journal, Arthur de Carle Sowerby (1885–1954). Even though I will not rest until I find the Chinese version of the poem (ideally translated into Chinese in a bilingual edition), I have to be satisfied meanwhile that this four-line-stanza poem exists at all. For now, all I can do is make an educated assumption that the poem must have been translated into Chinese sometime between 206 B.C.E. and 220 C.E. during the Han Dynasty. King Bardyl(lis) ruled Dardania from 385 to 358 B.C. Here is the song:

Ho Malësi, po t'shtrej fjalë për maja brryli;
Sot asht shtua me djal kral Bardhyli.
Illiri ynë Klintu emnin djalit ja ka than
Na u baft për shpatë, e na u baft për nam!

Ho Malci, across the elbow words I lay;
King Bardhyli(s) had his son today,
Klintu our Illyrian has named his son
May he be a swordsman, a famous one![21]

Nevertheless, based on the language, content, and structure of the poem, we have every reason to believe that this stanza is a song (or part of a song) that belongs to the "Sung Across the

[21] Translated from the Chinese by Arthur Sowerby, 1891 (Sowerby, 288–89 pmf.)

Shoulder" genre. We can compare it stylistically with the following lines taken from a more recent song of this nature titled "Sung Across the Shoulder":

> Hark to what the grapevine cries:
> Tells Gjokova to arise,
> Calls across the west wind's bluster:
> Peja and Rugovë to muster!
> Here's a hint from one who knows:
> Troopship landing many foes,
> Pouring out as black as crows.

The ancient poem is in the authentic Albanian meter and form. In only four lines, we find more information about the Illyrians than in hundreds of speculating essays combined. That is the true power of the oral verse. These poems survived the test of time, because they are pure history. From this point of view, I agree with Stavre Th. Frasheri's comment on the epic verse that "a song not only changes in content, but travels as well from one place to another. Each place alters the song in accordance with its own character, and this very fact makes it difficult to trace its origin."[22] Nevertheless, the context is the poetic power of Albanian historical epic poetry. The fact that we have these few fragments that come to us from very, very long ago clearly indicates that there was a vital literary tradition going on in 300 B.C. and that it has been continuous. The "Songs Across the Shoulder" are still being performed in current oral poetry, and that particular idiom goes back to 300 B.C.

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[22] Frasheri, Stavre Th. *Through Mirdite in Winter.* Translated by Peter R. Prifti. Boulder: East European Monographs, 2002. p 88.

1.5 BALKAN VIOLENCE AND THE ROLE OF THE POETS

As Durham has so intuitively detected, “It is the fashion among journalists and others to talk of the ‘lawless Albanians’; but there is perhaps no other people in Europe so much under the tyranny of laws.”[23] In many ways, this holds true even today in Malësia e Madhe because, as Leonard Fax noticed, “Albanian customary law has left its mark on the character of the people, a fact confirmed by their moral and ethical standards, such as a sense of honor, vengefulness, courage and decisiveness in critical situations, and a feeling of closeness within the family, the brotherhood, and the clan.”[24]

But the role of poets in preserving these unwritten laws can be open to serious social and ethical allegations. Sadly, according to an 1894 report published in the *Geographical Journal*, these kinds of customary laws have had devastating results “in a country like Northern Albania, where not seventy-five percent of the people die a natural death.”[25] Many of the poems translated here reflect the circumstances under which such enormous human losses could be tolerated.

Most contemporary scholars agree that territorial conflicts have contributed to this way of life at least as much as the art of the oral poetry is concerned. Indeed, it could be argued that the poets were, if anything, international and nonpartisan in their sympathies. Milman Parry and

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[23] Durham. p 41.

[24] Dukagjini, Lekë. The Code of Lekë Dukagjini. Translated by Leonard Fox. New York: Gjonlekaj Publishing Company, 1989. Foreword by Martin Camaj. p xv.

[25] Cozens-Hardy, W.H. “Montenegro and its Borderlands.” *The Geographical Journal*, no. 5 (November 1894). p 385.

Albert Lord in the mid-1930s dedicated a great deal of time and effort trying to determine the major poets of the Slavic part of the Balkan states, their ethnicity, and above all the nature of their concerns in their respective heroic epic songs. And "interestingly enough, four out of the five singers whose songs appear in this [their] volume were Albanians: Salih Ugljanin, Djemal Zogic, Sulejman Makic and Alija Fjuljanin. These singers from Novi Pazar in the Sanjak were willing and able to reproduce the same epic songs in Bosnian (Serbo-Croatian) and Albanian."[26] This statement attests to the fact that oral poets are not only innocent of stirring up ethnic conflicts but should actually be credited for their efforts to minimize the importance of ethnic and geographical divisions, as well as for emphasizing that oral poetry is an art of all the people of the Balkans. In other words, if four out of five poets that Parry and Lord studied in the Slavic Balkans were Albanians, then Hardy's statistics on Albanian deaths outside of natural causes cannot be blamed on the epic poets, but rather on the nature of the social structure of the Balkans. This could mean that the people of Malësia e Madhe should look within their own and their neighbors' social and political spheres to find answers that would explain the reasoning for their historically inexhaustible deadly conflicts with the Montenegrins, Serbs, and Bosnians.

Did they really hate their neighbors—and vice versa—that much? Did they blame the conflicts on the oral poets and oral poetry? These questions were on the tip of my tongue everywhere I went during my trip to Albania. I knew that now we could begin to explore this other organic branch of Indo-European culture. And I will never forget a passage that the

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[26] Eslie, Robert, and Janice Mathie-Heck. Songs of Frontier Warriors. Translated by Robert Elsie, & Janice Mathie-Heck. Wauconda: Bolchazy-Caducci Publishers, Inc., 2004. p v.

Albanian dictator Enver Hoxha used for his routine cultural speeches. Even he recognized the immense power of Albanian oral and literal tradition:

> You cannot write about the history of the Albanian people, without recognizing, without following, without discovering and studying its folklore, which mirrors the dialectic developments of that history. All events of the history of our people throughout the centuries, during the war periods, during our struggles, our joys, and sorrows have been absorbed generation after generation in the popular folklore.[27]

The problem was that he and his regime never made any serious attempt to make the treasury of Albanian folklore available to the scholars of the outside world.

During my research for this introduction I found another major politician who had been greatly interested in the art of epic poetry. It was Harlan Berkley Peabody (1929–2009), a Harvard University graduate in Comparative Literature who had studied the oral tradition with Professor Albert B. Lord and written the foreword to Dr. Robert Elsie's *Songs of the Frontier Warriors*. He shares part of his experience:

> I remember Lord telling me how Marshal Tito, with good intentions, instituted festival competitions to reward the best traditional singers. The judges sat with texts before them evaluating performances like the judges in *Die Meistersinger*. Singers quickly learned that to win the prize they needed to memorize an authorized text and perform it in grand style. Those who did so came out best. Few singers kept to their traditional ways.[28]

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[27] Haxhihasani, Qemal, ed. Epika Lengendare. Vol. II. Tirana: Akademia E Shkencave e Rps Të Shqipërisë, 1983. p 5.

[28] Elsie and Mathie-Heck. p vii.

If the former absolute leaders of two different countries (Albania and the former Yugoslavia) had such high consideration for the same folk poetry, I asked myself, how is it possible that their countries were such extreme enemies? As it turns out, both Hoxha and Tito liked epic poetry because the people whom they represented loved their folk songs, and those songs could be used to divide as well as unite. As Zef Leka noticed, "they used folk songs to manipulate people into their political games." The Albanian epic poet Gjergj Fishta had told them long ago: "Whoever is a man of pen and letters, and is capable of comprehending in his own mind the Fatherland idea, should be able to truly understand the immense importance that the collection of folklore in itself holds for his country."[29] Both Hoxha and Tito must have been aware of the true power of the beautiful oral folk songs their countries had produced throughout history. Unlike Tito, it is well documented that Hoxha has executed and imprisoned many poets just because he was afraid that their pen would interfere with his totalitarian politics. And on top of that he denied his people access to the beautiful Slavic epic poetry. Through poetic art, people can recognize the good, the pride, the expectations, the sacrifices, and above all the true spirit of the identity of their neighbors.

The nature of fighting is indeed complicated in the Balkans: "Just because we kill each other doesn't mean we hate each other" I was told by Fatime Çehrja, an elderly woman from Reçi. Interestingly enough, this was the same thing a Serbian woman from Vraka had told Edith Durham in 1908: "The Moslems have killed a great many of us, but, thanks to God, we have shot

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[29] Kanuni shqip, Fishta. p v.

plenty of them."[30] And that is not because the loss of life has no meaning in Malësia e Madhe and Northern Albania, because it truly does:

> One song was of a widow who had two sons. The elder went to the mountain and turned robber. His mother believed him dead. The younger stayed with her, but having to cross the mountains for business was shot at from behind a rock and mortally wounded. As he lay dying the two brothers recognized one another. Horrified, the elder was about to shoot himself, when the younger cried, "Do not kill both our mother's sons. Go to her and tell her I have gone to a far country, and that you will stay with her." He died, and the robber returned home.[31]

Only life without honor has no meaning. Nevertheless, the definition of honor changes from country to country in the Balkan states. How can one know if all paths that could lead to knowing each other's culture are blocked? Or even worse, when the definition of honor is subject to change in accordance with the diplomacy of each other's respective political leaders? But "perhaps this struggle is the most interesting thing here, the fierce combat between two completely different elements of the human environment—the artistic dream on the one hand and the brutality of history on the other."[32]

Certainly, hatred related to territorial issues has continuously resulted in death throughout Albanian history. But this and other social and political issues mentioned above have never been limited to dealings with the neighboring countries. What we now consider minor things—ownership of a patch of land, an offending word, even over-ebullient, in-your-face celebration—

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[30] Durham. p 17.

[31] Durham. p 48–49.

[32] Zagajewski, Adam, ed. *Polish Wrighters on Writing.* San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 2007. p xv.

have traditionally concluded in fatal casualties in the northern Albanian tribes and sometimes within the families of Malësia e Madhe. But that by no means was due to hatred as we know it today. Oral poets and performers are a good example. According to author and historian Prenk Gruda (1924–1999), the mountaineers of Malësia e Madhe are among very few people in the world who for centuries have honored lahutarët (the lute players) and oral poets by holding contests that all the Balkan states at one time or another have attended. Malësia e Madhe, to the best of my knowledge, is the only place in the world that would honor the winners by naming or renaming their mountains and valleys after them:

> ...that is how Malësia has names of places like Vukpalaj, which until the last decade of the nineteenth century was called “Vorri i Papës.” The elderly (pleqtë) would not agree if the first place should go to a performer from Kosovo by the name of Qemal Palaj or the Serbian performer Dragan Vuković, who was the first cousin of the Montenegrin writer Vojvoda Gavro Vuković [Војвода Гавро Вуковић] (1852—1928). Since no woman had the nerve to stay around for that long to break the tie, they were forced to share the first prize honoring both of them. That’s how we have now the compound name Vukpalaj. Vuk in short for Vuković and Palaj.[33]

And this kind generosity is well embedded in all three major branches of Albanian oral verse.

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[33] Marinaj, Gjeke. "Prenk Gruda; I am a mounteneer." The Poets' Times, April-May 1998: p 17.

1.6 SONGS OF THE KRESHNIKS

Another genre in the oral literature of Albania is to be found in the songs of the Kreshniks (këngë Kreshnikës), of special importance to the inhabitants of the Malësia e Madhe. They "mirror the image of a magnificent artistic monument that speaks for the history of our people—the physiology, the ethics, the life; cautious as hasty, peaceful and gracious as combative and stubborn of our mountaineers."[34] The Kreshniks, the heroes in this verse category, were envisioned by the poets, performers, and by their general audience as giant men of extraordinary physical power and fairytale capabilities who selflessly undertook heroic actions to protect their people and their land:

> The daughter of the King had been betrothed
> In marriage to our Gjeto-basho Muji.
> He's picked out thirty men to greet the King
> And bring the bride in triumph to her wedding.
> Sokol Halili was their chosen leader.
>
> But Muji held them back and said these words.
> "In God's name who created you, mark well:
> Do not dismount while you pass through the mountains,
> Do not allow your horses loose to play;
> No one should dance, though it be customary;
> You are forbidden to fire off your guns.
> For mountain-witches live about the passes,
> Whose magic can turn man and horse to stone."
> And so the wedding-guests mount to their saddles
> And set off on their journey to the King.
>
> They passed safe through the mountains of the witches,

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[34] Sako and Haxhihasani. p 6.

> Remembering that they were not to dance
> Nor loose the horses on the grass to play,
> And draw back on their bridles as he told them;
> And not one shot they fired at rock or tree,
> And safe and sound they came then to the King.

These lines, taken from "Muji and the Three Witches," are characteristic of the Kreshnik songs. Though such songs often deal with historical or semi-historical figures like Muji, they are often fanciful, magical, and perhaps by implication fictional in nature. Their origins are obscure. Unlike most Albanian scholars who think that "the home of the heroes, Jutbin, has been identified with the town of Udbina on the Lika River in western Croatia, about 50 km northeast of Zadar, or alternatively with the village of Udbina on the Drinjaca River in eastern Bosnia."[35] The people of Malësia e Madhe believe the home of their heroes is not Udbina in Croatia, but Gubina, a rough mountain area located between the villages Lukaj and Jugomir near Mount Veleçik.

Locals do not agree that the name "Kreshnik" is a supernatural name either. They believe the correct spelling is not "Këngët e Kreshnikëve të Utbinës," but "Katkat e Kreshtnikve të Gubinës." "The Zanas (the mountain fairies) of our mountains have turned the cave of Gubina into a permanent freshwater well so our Kreshtniks who lived forever in our Kreshta (the rockiest tip of a mountain range) would survive the same Zanas who turned Muji and Halili from poor shepherds to Kreshtnik heroes," Prof. Llesh Rushaj of Bajza told me during a personal interview about the Albanian legendary songs. He, like many others in that area, believes that these songs are simply the songs that their sons sang while tending their animals at the very tip of

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[35] Eslie, Robert, and Janice Mathie-Heck. Songs of Frontier Warriors. Translated by Robert Elsie, & Janice Mathie-Heck. Wauconda: Bolchazy-Caducci Publishers, Inc., 2004. p 182.

the mountain range of Veleçiku, inspired by its rugged, powerful, and intimidating nature that is in accord with the very nature of the mountaineers of Malësia e Madhe.

In terms of definition, however, the mountaineers agree with Robert Elsie, who claims that the Kreshnik songs "still sung by old men playing their one-stringed lahutas and two-stringed çiftelis not only in Albania but also in southern Bosnia, Montenegro, Serbia, and Kosova, are the literary reflections of legends portraying and glorifying the heroic feats of warriors of the past."[36] They also agree that the people of Malësia e Madhe have survived "in these mountains with small patches of workable land which produce less corn than there is hunger" by gaining strength from the very honor and glory traditionally illuminated in their epic songs and other artistic traditions.[37] They love their legendary oral poems not only because they are quite unique in comparison to other poetic forms, but also because they are "full of myths like orë, zana, devils, dragons, saints, and kulshedra that often fight on behalf of or against humans and other live forms on the mountains."[38] They adore them because Muji, Halili, and their people represent to the core the people of Malësia e Madhe. Just like their Kreshniks over four centuries ago, still their "stone houses are good and large—some great one-roomed structures, others with stable below and dwelling-room above."[39] And, even though "quite

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[36] Eslie, Robert, and Janice Mathie-Heck. Songs of Frontier Warriors. Translated by Robert Elsie, & Janice Mathie-Heck. Wauconda: Bolchazy-Caducci Publishers, Inc., 2004. p 182.

[37] Palushaj, Lulash N. *Malsia Dhe Fiset E Saj.* Lezhë: Enti Botues Poligrafik, 1996. p 20.

[38] Hasanaj, Gjergj. *Malësori Këndon.* Titograd: Cetinë, 1971. p 7.

[39] Durham. p 16.

unfurnished within" they still are "very fairly clean," and the children are still "bonny and newly washed." And just as their Kreshniks used to do, most of the people still manage to get "a cross tattooed on the back of the right hand."[40]

1.7 EPIC STORY AND EPIC CYCLE

Albanian epic[41] oral poetry as a whole does not consist of long epics like Homer's Iliad and Odyssey, Virgil's Aeneid, or the Battle of Kosovo. "The long songs are about 1,000 lines long, but the usual range is no more than 200 lines. Performers usually have about 40 to 50 songs in their individual repertoires."[42] That is how oral poetry in the Albanian tradition is: what we might call an epic cycle or a proto-epic. It is not a single epic poem. Because of the oppression by the Ottomans, Greeks, Romans, Slavs, and the communists, among others, the Albanian epic cycle never got a chance to mature into a single coherent literary epic. But what we had was an epic tradition that was almost ripe to give birth to great epic but it actually never developed into a real epic. And this is not a typical Albanian phenomenon. The Hawaiian Islands population, for instance, was great enough, its civilization was high enough, and the mythological material was rich enough for an epic to be fully composed. All they needed was for Kamehameha I (1758–

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[40] Durham. p 14.

[41] The word epic in the Albanian traditional folk poetry has two main literary uses: a strict use, as a long narrative poem dealing with a national hero or national heroes; and a loose use, as any literary composition that resembles an epic in some way.

[42] Sako and Haxhihasani. p 12.

1819) to stay in power long enough to create a literary tradition, and probably within a century they would have come up with a great epic about Pelé. Because the English and then the Americans took over, they have yet to make it happen.

One of the major differences between the Albanian oral poetry and other epics is that the other epics, in a manner of speaking, created a straight line of tradition, whereas the Albanian oral poetry developed in many small cycles, resulting in a circle of story cycles. The other traditional epics developed with plots following long straight lines with a beginning, middle, and end. Albanian poems move in small circles, creating a unique poetic tension within the larger poetic cycle. The scholars in historically much bigger countries than Albania have detected similar symptoms. Take Russia as an example: “There were signs that heroic poetry was ailing and had begun to suffer from a hardening of the arteries. The first symptom of such decay is that a poet’s repertory shrinks. Stories, which were once common and popular, pass out of currency, are forgotten, and no longer sung.”[43] Fortunately the last part of Bowra’s claim did not happen in the case of the Albanian oral poetry. But the rest of his statement did. That is also because the Albanians had neither a Troy nor a Homer, neither a Rome nor a Virgil, neither an Achilles nor an Aeneas. So the major oral poems went in circles, getting richer and stronger, to the point that the poetic cycles became like overloaded poetic domes and could no longer hold their own in the traditional form. And during the first decades of the twentieth century the poetic cycles naturally erupted, giving birth first to the Albanian national poet Gjergj Fishta (1871–1940), an Albanian

[43] Bowra, C. M. *From Virgil to Milton.* London: Macmillan & Co. Ltd, 1948. p 562.

Franciscan priest and translator, and then to Albania's only fully matured epic poem, Fishta's *The Lute of Malësia* (Lahuta e Malëcis).

It is not inconceivable that if (before the Fishta era) the Albanians had had another 100 years or so of political and economic coherence when they were not dominated by other cultures, Muji and Halili would be like other major heroes such as Achilles, Beowulf, Sigurd, Jim Cade, Karna, Roland, Siegfried, Son Wukong, and so on. In the total absence of the necessary political and economic coherence, until Fishta came into the picture, Albanian epic had no choice but to accept the fate of remaining "in the shadow of the Serbo-Croatian, or more properly, Bosnian epic, with which it has undeniable affinities." [44]

The fact that art cannot be oppressed or buried forever has long been the only hope of the Albanian people, who never stopped creating and performing folkloric poems. Nevertheless, they must be happy that Fishta came along. It could have been worse. According to Frederick Turner, there is an analogy in England: the canonical epic of King Arthur never actually existed, and the closest we get is Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* as printed by William Caxton. What Malory did was to amass all the Arthurian stories he could find into a fine prose collection of great Arthurian stories, but it does not quite constitute the Arthurian Epic. Why? Because the Normans invaded England. So England archived that material, then eventually when the big flowering did happen with Shakespeare, Milton, and Spenser, the material was there for them to use. The Trojan story was oppressed for 400 years until Homer put all the stories together and collected them into a great epic. It is not that nations create languages, but rather that languages create nations.

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[44] Elsie and Mathie-Heck. p xi.

1.8 FOLK SONG: A DIRGE IN ILLYRIA

In the Albanian oral tradition, folk songs can be seen as a separate poetic genre, independent of historic and legendary epic verse. Folk songs, known in Albanian as Këngë folklorike, are subject to constant change in style, form, and subject matter. They only include and never exclude what people create and perform anywhere the Albanian language is spoken, from simple love songs, wedding songs, and healing incantations to more complex compositions such as the lament.

In Malësia e Madhe, there are several recognized dirge singers. The lament is an important part of Albanian folkloric poetry. Funerary rituals are about the oldest manifestations of the human presence on this planet, but the Albanian style of lamentation is uniquely Albanian and extremely ancient. To the people of Malësia e Madhe, it gives a sense of identity to the Albanian people and their culture. It guides almost every step of a funeral ceremony. The central art of this tradition is an extemporaneous creation and delivery of verse performed by guest poets during a funeral. It is part of the last honors the mountaineers of Albania offer to their departed family members. Usually the deceased lies in a coffin with the top half of the coffin lid open. He or she is dressed in the best traditional clothes the family can afford, and those who are Christians hold a rosary in their crossed hands. As the visitors usually arrive in the hundreds and sometimes thousands to pay their last respects to the deceased and the family, they begin shaking hands with the immediate family of the deceased, beginning with the closest relative and continuing to greet even distant family members. The typical words they murmur are “May God give strength to you,” or “May God save the rest of your loved ones,” or “May God keep him in

Heaven." As they accept visitors' condolences, women poets are invited to lament during the ritual, and each one in succession usually sits on a low stool next to the coffin. Dressed in black clothes with a white scarf on her head, each woman poet extends a larger black veil over her face in a tented manner to conceal her face. She now begins her delivery of the verse. She begins with an audible sigh, "HEIA," three times over. Then, with the delivery of each line of verse, she and the other female mourners simultaneously bow their veiled heads. Dirge singers alternate in their delivery of impromptu verses.

Since the legendary Albanian oral verse is concentrated mostly in the Malësia e Madhe region, I offer the reader one of the laments for the renowned Prenk Gruda (1912–1999). His funeral ceremony, at which I was present, took place in his homeland in the Montenegrin part of Malësia e Madhe. Prenk Gruda was a very well-known, respected, and loved son of that region; he was a writer, schoolteacher, and a published historian who shared his life with his own birthplace of Gruda in Montenegro. As a young man, he spent most of his early adult life studying and teaching Albanian history in central Albania, mainly in the city of Elbasan. In the last part of his life he was a businessman in Michigan and Florida. Then, based on his last request to his beloved wife, Ana Gruda, a Croatian-born nurse, he was transported and buried in his beloved birthplace. I focused on his funeral not only as an ethnographic case study, but more importantly, as background to this genre of Albanian oral verse.

With this in mind, I studied six different lamenters known locally as epic poets (vajtarë / vajtare), three women and three men. I recorded their body language, their delivery style, the content of their verse, and the literary methods they used—such as the timing of the lines, their rhythm, the use of metaphors and similes, their end rhymes, alliteration, and assonance.

Each dirge poet creates an average of 145 to 150 lines for each lamentation session, taking fourteen to fifteen minutes, which gives approximately 5-6 seconds, divided between the line on one hand and the long cries at the beginning and end of each line on the other. Women poets use a soft melancholic tone of voice, a monotone melody emphasizing an extended cry ("Oooo") before each line and ending each stanza with the single sad cry of "Heia." Their lines do keep an irregular A/A rhyme scheme in their couplets, with an occasional use of half rhymes. Metaphors, similes, epithets, and personifications of natural objects are incorporated into their stanzas. In terms of content, women lamenters like to concentrate on the female view of what a good person is. All three lamenters emphasized Gruda's qualities as a man who sadly had to leave his country. They also mentioned the respect and love he always showed toward his wife and his family, his effort to keep the honor of his birthplace alive wherever he went, his charity for people in need, and the support he offered to his countrymen when they arrived in America with or without his assistance through the immigration channels:

Every child that God gives here,
When he's reached his thirteenth year,
Left his crib, and learned to speak,
Then his father he will seek,
Asks permission if he may
Into exile pass away.
Friendless in the world he'd roam:
With Preng Gruda found a home,
Food, and fire, and honor found,
Someone in a far cold land
Who could hear their voice and tongue,
Homesick, struggling, and young.
No-one, Preng, you turned away,
All who knocked your door could stay,
You would never hide nor shun,
But were friend to everyone.

The poets often switch attention to one of the closest relatives of the deceased, vocalizing what they might imagine to be possible answers to the questions in his or her thoughts and feelings with respect to family, friends, and country on the occasion of the dear one's departure from life. They then turn their attention to the second- and third-closest relatives, emphasizing the sadness that others might feel about their loss. This would include a direct name from the immediate family or friends. Unlike the male mourners, they stay away from any criticism either of the deceased or of the people who survive him. Social qualities such as bravery, keeping one's word, the importance of receiving and giving education, and a summary of Gruda's personal achievements were part of the content.

One of the most interesting positions that lamenters took was the judging of what was sad and problematic for Gruda, not based on what the deceased personally felt was problematic, but based on the fundamental beliefs of the society from which the lamenting poet came. For example, all six lamenters who performed considered the fact that Gruda had no children as the saddest and most tragic thing that had happened apart from his own death. All this was in complete contrast with Gruda's own feelings on the issue. In a self-made recording in Detroit on June 23, 1971, which was later published on Robert Elsie's website under the section on Albanian Language and Dialect, Gruda claimed in his own voice:

> Many people feel bad because they cannot have children. I am one myself who has none. Why? It is important to help this world progress—and to simply add to the number of people on this earth, what are these people good for on earth if they do not leave works and good deeds behind? And if they don't have good intentions in life, what value do they have if they have no other purpose in life than to be like herds of animals?[45]

[45] See Robert Elsie's website at http://www.albanianliterature.net

As the lamenters performed these lines of sadness, all the other women who usually sat around the lamenting women raised their own voices chanting as a choir in support of their comments. Following the performance of the lamenting women poets came the men. Male poet lamenters were accompanied by a Gruda family member. Depending on the space, they remained about 20 feet from the coffin. They were dressed in black business or casual suits and white shirts; a tie was optional since the ceremony was truly based on the epic tradition reaching back to when there were no ties. All three male poets took their respective turns and stood up straight with their hands on their hips, maintaining a distant facial expression. They started their laments with the highest possible tone of voice in a frightening scream-like fashion with the words "I suffer with misery because of your death, Prenk Gruda!" They averaged a time frame of 4.22 seconds per line. In terms of line meter and poetic structure their verse was just like that of the lamenting women, but the long emphasis on key words of each line increased the average time over that of each line when performed by the women lamenters. The only major difference in poetic devices and structure between the women and men was that the tone of voice passed from a normal sense of sadness into an extremely terrifying sense of loss. The other difference was the content of the subject matter. The men put more emphasis on Gruda's masculine qualities. Another major difference is that men lament only men. They do not lament women, though there are rare exceptions, whereas women lament both women and men. Although they shared the same concern for his lack of offspring as the women poets, the men considered it less tragic since he left behind many nephews and nieces, and above all he left a good name in the history of Albanian literature, nationalism, and patriotism. In their view, his numerous published books were considered an effective substitute for his lack of children. Like the women poets, they

emphasized not the fact that he failed to continue his bloodline with a child, but rather that he had no son. None of the lamenters treated his love for his wife and for the other female members of his surviving family as being less important than his love for the male members of his family. Another major distinction between the men and women lamenters was that the men commented on sensitive issues concerning Gruda. They mentioned the fact that two people (Marash Mark Elezi and Marash Dojani from Hoti of Malësia e Madhe) suffered ten years of political imprisonment in the communists' toughest prisons in Albania for saving Gruda's life in his youth. The women brought up positive deeds such, Gruda's helping people who wanted to immigrate to America, while the men lamenters saw this as a drain of manhood from Albanian society.

The men also started and finished their lamentation not with a cry of "Heia," as did the women, but with a screaming sound "emptying of the chest"—"EEEEH," three times over.

1.9 FOLK SONG: A WEDDING IN DAJÇ

Wedding songs are as important to Albanians as their laments. I will concentrate on a specific wedding that took place in Albania while I was conducting research for this dissertation. This was a relevant topic because the poetry of such celebrations represents the folkloric part of Albanian epic poetry, which, in contrast to the historical epic, is not so formalized as a genre. The wedding theme is not limited to any kind of fixed subject matter. It is limitless, as it can deal with all kinds of life issues such as love, nature, the dairy, shepherds, and marriage, and includes songs of joy, victory, humor, loss, and satire, among others. Although folklore is typical

throughout Albania, the historical and legendary epic is an art specific to Malësia e Madhe. The wedding is the only ceremony in Albanian culture where any other culture can be included and considered as entertainment, softening the traditional processions.

I was fortunate to find a wedding where the family and organizers were willing to let me record and take notes of their event. I am grateful to the Mikel Pjetri family of Dajç, who gave me full access to every part of their son Kol's wedding. It exemplified this very unique ceremony where tradition reigned throughout and every part of the celebration was performed in songs associated with the event.

All conversations were expressed in sung verse. Religious songs, fundamentally Christian songs, followed the wedding proceedings. One night before the wedding took place, the father of the groom invited all of his immediate family to gather in his two-story home right after the performance of the Christian songs that are believed to bring good fortune to the newly married couple. He gathered his immediate family to assign the duties for the wedding day. For each duty, such as appointing individuals to deliver invitations in the villages, songs were sung as they chose the topics or duties to be discussed. The performers, the immediate family, and the hosts were dressed in traditional folk costume during this event. While the performers stood in the background, the host sat next to the fireplace, kneeling on one knee, while his wife stood behind him and the rest of the people sat in a squatting position on a rug awaiting their assignments. The families of both the bride and groom had to perform each function by combining it with the appropriate song. The family of the bride, usually the mother and a professional bride dresser, were to prepare the bride. Other members of the family, dressed in traditional costume, were showing the most important garments and jewelry that the bride was to take with her to her new

home. As they showed each piece, the performers sang lines that were directly related to that garment or piece of jewelry:

> The bride is asking for a golden coin vest
> We couldn't find a golden coin vest
> And the mother said, "I will send her mine," etc.

When the bride was ready and the horse-drawn bridal escort arrived, a song was performed announcing the escort's arrival and asking if the bride was ready. They brought one horse, which was white and especially decorated to carry the bride; a performer led a song especially for the horse. In the meantime, the performers inside the bride's room sang a song telling the bride that it was time for her to move on from being a girl to being a bride and to leave the family. Another group of ladies responded in a dialog style on behalf of the bride, who was dressing and had a tear in her eyes. The lyrics expressed the sadness of the bride having to turn her back on her mother. The bride was finally dressed in her traditional costume and red facial veil. She again hears the bridal escort calling her:

> "Are you ready, our bride?
> We have come to get you.
> Stand up and embrace your father.
> Stand up and embrace your mother.
> Stand up and embrace your family . . . ."

While her father and mother accompanied her on either side, she continued to cry in a sad voice for her departure from her family. They escorted her to the horse and mounted her on the saddle. As the escort traveled with the bride, they were all singing relationship songs. When they

approached the groom's home, the men and women began their folk dances announcing the arrival of the bride. The groom's whole family came to meet and greet the bride. As she descended from the horse with her face still covered with the veil, two women from the groom's family escorted her to her new bedroom. While they were dancing, they sang songs saying how lucky she was to be marrying the man she had chosen and loves; how lucky she was to come to this good house; how lucky she was that her groom had never been married; and how lucky she was to come to a house where she would always be loved and respected.

While the bride went to her room, the organizers put all kinds of rugs in the front yard and set *sofras* in the house. The father of the groom invited the family and guests to sit at the various *sofras* divided by region, gender, age, and social status. At this time, seating songs were sung. Also, a song was performed joining the two families. Men and women sang different songs depending on their interests. Most of the time they began with the line, "What a joy have we found here," immediately followed by songs to the Rakia (local spirit) which, together with the guests, was actually being served with traditional foods, including lamb and goat roasted on open spits. After the Rakia and guests had been served, other songs were heard including those containing humor and sarcasm.

The guests sat in two separate groups, and a woman performer got up from the women's section and began to sing addressing the host. She called the host a fool for inviting them for only one day because under his hospitality, they wanted to stay a week. Staying for a day, under these joyful circumstances, would only allow them to get their clothes dirty. Then the men responded, led by one man calling them bohemian women, lewdly dressed and rude. Then a young group of men joined in, siding with the women. The older men again said, "You all look

like head lice and sissies.” The younger men responded, “We are all handsome men; you all are fart faces.” Then the young men and the women closed the comic contest by telling the old men, “May you all go bald.” Next from the various guests came all kinds of nature songs, love songs, and bravery songs; and these preceded the professional entertainment of a group with a band. Then the bride came out and presented herself to the guests. Her father uncovered her face and everyone began singing songs about the specific features of the bride’s beauty. They sang the traditional lines, “How beautiful is our bride / Marshalla, Marshalla.” They compared her eyes to coffee cups. They compared her body’s grace to that of a cypress tree, her face was sweet as cookies, and her brows were like the crescent of the moon. Her mouth was that of a small jewelry box. All of that was followed by a final couplet wishing a good life together for the bride and groom, and hopes that they would multiply like the seed on the ground and grow together like a cotton tree.

The closing song was performed while everyone was dancing by a single performer who sang a song addressed to the cities in other regions, asking them “Why do you look at us strangely… just because I don’t want your girls? The girls of Dajç are kind to me and they are willing to dance with me.

CHAPTER 2

THE RECONSTRUCTION OF THE TRANSLATION PROCESS

Albanian oral poetry is linguistically sophisticated, artistically awe-inspiring, thematically multihued, and historically violent. Consequently, in translating these poems, I have encountered several problems that are not immediately evident in translating written poetry. Using a digital voice recorder made things easier, but many of the epic poets or performers are very old — and, as one would expect, forgetful — which makes it challenging to transcribe their performances into textual form. The poets and performers I recorded used an ancient form of the Albanian language. That language was rooted in the Gegh dialect (northern Albanian dialect). Translating it into contemporary Albanian became another translation exercise in itself. Take the poem "Eight bad eggs," for instance. The narrator of the poem is an Albanian Muslim poet whose only son died because of eating spoiled eggs while celebrating Easter with his Catholic friends in Kastrat of Malësia e Madhe. The 8-year-old boy was participating in an Easter festival, which for Albanian Christians, as elsewhere in the Christian world, is a major event.

As a translator, I had to make decisions that are sensitive to the religious beliefs and ethnographic rituals. Translating these poems required a high awareness to tune in to the nuances of sound and rhythm in the cadence of each line. Let's start with some of the steps I took in translating this specific poem, before considering a broader spectrum of the overall reconstruction of the translation process. After listening to the voice recording of the poem and

studying the notes taken from a brief interview I had with the performer, I transcribed the poem into Albanian language textual form without altering any of its linguistic properties. That resulted in the following:

TET VE T'ÇARTUNA

Uladi em musliman,
Djali em i vetum,
Tet vjet i ka,
Hager tet ve t'çartuna,
Dhan ka zëmrat tuoja t'mira
N'kyt dit t'madhe t'Pashkve.

Tash
Zëmra e tij ka pushua;
Ai a kthye me faqe
Ka Zoti yn i përbashkt.

Djali em i vetun.
I vram.

Jo ka Pashkt tuoja t'bakueme,
Jo ka zëmrat tuoja t'mira
Por ka
Tet ve t'hatashme!

I grew up communicating in the modern Gegh dialect. I listened to the local poets and performers, and read Gjergj Fishta's works in the ancient Gegh. I decided against translating the poem from the old Gegh to modern Gegh, instead translating it into the modern Albanian:

TETË VEZË TË PRISHURA

Fëmija im mysliman,
Djali im i vetëm,
Tetë vjeç,

Hëngri tetë vezë të prishura,
Dhënë nga zemrat tuaja të mira
Në këtë ditë të madhe të Pashkëve.

Tani
Zemra e tij ka pushuar;
Ai është kthyer me fryrë
Nga Zoti ynë i përbashkët,

Djali im i vetëm.
I vrarë.

Jo nga Pashkët tuaja të bekuara,
Jo nga zemrat tuaja të mira
Por nga
Tetë vezë të tmerrshme!

I found two troublesome words that not only had different meanings in comparisons with the modern Albanian, but also with the modern Gegh. The first word is *çartuna*, used as an intransitive verb in the title of the poem and repeated in the fourth line. The second is *hatashme*, the last word of the poem. In the contemporary Albanian official language, the meaning of *çartuna* was reduced to *skaduara*, meaning expired. In the early 1500s, however, the word *çatrun(a)* was used to denote extreme bravery (*trim i çartun*), and later in the early 1900s the word *çartun(a)* was mostly known as a condescending denotation in a humoristic sense, and other times as degrading in the shameful sense. The word (e) *hatashm*e was used in the mid-1700s as the equivalent of the modern day *masakër* (massacre), as in *ai bani hâtan* (he slaughtered as many people as he could). From the first decade of the 20th century, the meaning of the word *hatashme* has streamed out into many directions. Depending on the context, it can

stand for misfortune, disaster, horror or highly regarded people, as in “he is amazing” (ai ështё i hatashёm). These differences had to be addressed.

The translation process of this poem started long before the course of reconstructing actual words and ideas into text. I went through a well-focused period of brainstorming and poetic contemplation, and found myself deeply engaged in a preliminary translation method that was in total absence of any kind of practical writing. It enabled me to absorb the act of translation on a personal level, making reconnections not only through my knowledge in theory and philosophy of translation, but also with the folkloric essentials of my own cultural heritage as an Albanian. These links were effective because they generated a preparatory initiative, within which I started molding some of the compulsory linguistic, cultural, historic and poetic ideas of the poems into imaginary translations. If nothing else, they served as awareness of my goal: that the final version of the translated poems should look and feel as natural as possible in the English language without jeopardizing the overall poetic qualities of the original.

I began the translations of these poems by establishing a word-to-word correspondence and creating a TROT. After selecting the best possible words to represent the original, I recreated each line of the poem in English, without regard to word order, grammar, or any other linguistic or poetic structure:

EIGHT EGGS OF ROTTEN

child my muslim
son my only,
eight years,
ate eight eggs rotten,
given by hearts your good
on this day great of Easter.

now
heart his has stopped;
he is turned with face
toward God our common,

son my of only
killed.

No by Easter your blessed,
No by hearts your good
but by
Eight eggs terrible!

In the next draft, I started reconstructing the poem by considering each word a piece of the poetic puzzle. This process of considering every translating possibility and questioning every decision continued until the poem developed into its final form.

While some of the more complex poems — especially those with strict meter, precise rhyme scheme, multilevel metaphors, and a complicated dialectic lexicon — went through many more drafts, this poem's simple structure and basic language allowed me to quickly reach the final draft. Yet the two complicated words — *çartuna* and *hatashme* — demanded extra attention. As I transplanted them into the target language, all odds of giving multiple meanings and exact poetic properties to these words were against me. As a translator, I had to make one of three intricate choices.

First, I could overdramatize the poem by translating them as violent words, by substituting *çartuna* with poisonous and *hatashme* with murderess. This would be correct in theory, since the child died of food poisoning and no investigation was mentioned to rule out homicide. Doing that would leave the reader under the impression that the narrator is indirectly accusing his Catholic neighbors of murdering his Muslim child. Second, I could neutralize the

event by translating these two words in a way that would give them an ambiguous direction. This could be achieved by simply modifying them to mean possible and probable. Or, third, translate, as I have, not the content of the words but their intended meaning: The child Ate eight *bad* eggs (third line) and was killed by Eight *awful* eggs! (last line). Each time a translator assumes that his choices were based on the author's intent, the work under consideration becomes a matter of judgment. But the art of translation is synonymous with the art of judgment.

Sure, I made my choices to reflect the author's intent, but my decision on the poet's intent in the poem is an educated one. It was based on my own experience and training as an Albanian poet, on my northern Albanian background, and on my firsthand knowledge of the anthropological facts of the given poetic situation. The tone of the poem indicates sadness, grief, and disappointment caused by the nature of life in Albania at the time of the subject's death — not rage, suspicion, or other wrongdoing undertones against his Catholic friends and neighbors. Born and raised in Malësia e Madhe, I know too well (as the poet must have known) that members of the community would rather die from bad eggs, or have their own children perish from them, than someone else’s child, especially one who practices a different religion. It is that simple, because for them, honor has more meaning than life. The poet had the entire inventory of extreme words — including disaster, catastrophe, tragedy, and murder — at his disposal. But he carefully selected calm and peaceful words to ensure that there is no message against anyone, just the accident and the nature of life itself. He knew that his family tragedy is the tragedy of everyone in that community, and because of that, he gave the poem condoling nuances. Here is the final version:

EIGHT BAD EGGS

My Muslim child,
My only son,
Eight years old,
Ate eight bad eggs,
Given by your good hearts
On this good Easter Day.

Now
His heart has stopped;
He is facing the God we share,

My only son.
Killed.

Not by your good Easter
Not by your good hearts
But by
Eight awful eggs!

This leads me to a translation aspect that took place prior to the first written form of these translations. Soon after entertaining the idea of undertaking such a responsibility, I was able to identify with and be part of a similar muse that prompted the Albanian oral poets to translate the essence of their being into oral verse. Naturally, modern technology offers innovations that enable us to conduct high-quality video and audio recordings from the comfort of our homes. But I traveled to Albania to see, understand, feel, and record that kind of genuine information which no technology can capture. A distant translation of these oral poems, I feared, would lack many of the important contextual notions and other unique cultural elements that are of incalculable value to literary translators.

Speaking in retrospect, I can easily claim that these translations would have not been what they are today if I had not observed the oral poets of Malësia e Madhe performing live. Consider the poem "A charm against snakebite" as an illustrating argument. The poem, composed in an ancient polytheistic form, belongs to the magic charm and covert curative beliefs. Consequently, for all practical intentions, Zef Marinaj would have never performed the spell-poem in front of a camera if not for serious persuasive efforts by me and some of my fellow Albanian poets. According to ritual, if more than two people utilize the exact words within a particular clan, while the source performer is still alive, the healing words of the poem would lose their therapeutic power. The fact that I happen to be a member of the same tribe as the performer made the issue even more decisive. He had already entrusted the poem to one of his young relatives a few years ago when he was critically ill and fearing his own death. He made his reasons behind the hesitation to perform the poem clear: The digital recorder that I used to record the voice of each oral poet was a device designed to do a messenger's job, he said. Therefore, upon replay, it would become my co-translator. That would make it the third "person," to use his words; an act that would ultimately put an end to the healing power of his recitation of the spell-poem. In other words, his collaboration on the project was so perilous that it would break the oath of all the oral poets of Malësia e Madhe and undermine the ultimate values and dignity that Malesia e Madhe held dear for centuries.

I tried to explain to Zef that my Sony digital reorder is an electronic tool available to anyone, designed to neither represent nor do the job of a human translator. But he showed no signs of satisfaction. In his view, translation with the help of a digital device is not the same as translation with the help of a dictionary, because a dictionary is part of language and literature,

whereas digital recording is a process that belongs to science. Therefore, he was not ready to digitalize his medicinal powers that had been so effective for the inhabitants of Malësia e Madhe. In light of his concerns, the digital recording was no longer an option. I grabbed a pencil and my notebook instead.

Words were only part of his performance. He asked me to put my notebook away and quietly grabbed my left hand. He pulled a sharp, yellowish snake tooth out of what appeared to be an old snakeskin bag. After sanitizing the tooth and my index finger with strong rakia (premium grape brandy), he pricked my finger with it, and asked me to let my blood drip freely on the palm of my right hand, and to hold it as open and as motionless as possible. He took a small glass jar from the same bag, used the root part of the tooth to scoop out a small amount of grayish catskin powder-like substance, and poured it over the accumulated blood drops on my right hand. The last thing that came out of the snakeskin bag was a well-polished bloodstone similar in size and shape to a human thumb. Pressing the bloodstone tightly against my skin, he started mixing my blood and the catskin substance in a circular motion and then by making cross-shaped signs without losing contact with my skin, until he started shedding tears. As he pooled my right hand closer to his chin, he started turning his head from left to right so his tears ran, snakelike, from his eyes into the palm of my hand. Now as he included his tears into the mixing, he began to recite "A charm against snakebite" in Albanian:

> Gospod Pusi bërë një martesë
> Kështu ai ftoi Gospod Perin:
> Ndalojeni këtë gëzim martesor;
> Të ia presim rrugën nuses djallëzore,
> Të ia hapim rrugën nuses fisnike;
> Kafshimi i gjarprit vdektë në bukurinë e saj,

Shenjtëria e saj e kuroftë kafshimin.
Tfë, tfë, tfë...

In English:

Gospod Pusi called a wedding,
So he sent for Gospod Peri:
“Hold this wedding ceremony,
Let there be no wicked bride,
Let there be a virtuous bride,
May the snake die of her beauty,
May her goodness heal the sting.”
Tph, tph, tph...

At the end of these words, he pulled up his bloodstone and spat three times over the mixed substances on my hand, then asked me to go to the sink and wash all the snake poison away. When I asked him if that was his antidote to snake poison, "that would be the basic physical and psychological procedure, but it is the power of the words, the connection to God, and the ingredients that I would give you in a drink if you were a real patient, my son," he said smiling. This, however, came to life with the help of technology. Taking full advantage of my electronic devices, I was able to translate faster, with more accuracy, and ensure that my research material was safely stored. While my storage drives and even my laptop computer (which one might consider luxurious instruments in the hands of a literary translator) on occasion turned out to be important tools, my digital voice recorder, my camcorder and my camera were indispensable factors throughout the entire reconstruction of the translation process.

Let me elaborate on some of the specific functions I employed in recording, documenting, and photographing the poetic and ethnographic performances. I made the most of my digital voice recorder in nearly every step of the translation process. Each time I sought

collaboration with an oral poet, I became aware of the attention they paid to the voice-recording device. To my great surprise, it seemed like it established a kind of psychological connection between them and me. They were not camera-shy. On the contrary, they considered it as being part of my respect for their oral folk poetry, their cultural treasure. They made it clear that seeing their songs (that is their preferred name for the poems) translated into English was not as important to them as seeing them translated well. Through these songs, they expressed the admiration and appreciation for their local culture and national heritage, for past and present heroes, for the beautiful landscape, their own people and the spirit with which they were able to keep their language alive despite constant invasions by such countries as Turkey, Italy, and Germany. They often demanded that I replay the recordings more than once to make sure that they did not forget lines, stanzas, or even larger sections of the longer songs, admitting the possibility of such imperfections due to their old age and lack of performing such lengthy songs to not-so-patient younger audiences.

When unhappy with their performances, some of the poets and performers would ask me to immediately delete the recording. Others — after asking questions regarding my style of translation and how I would handle the problematic parts of their songs — would ask me if I would be willing to fill in the gaps for them. Initially, I hesitated to undertake such unconventional responsibility, but they assured me that attempts of this kind had been within the tradition of their anthropological and poetic techniques since ancient times. Learning that engaged me to get out of my comfort zone of traditional translation and enter the art of poetic restoration. Once a disconnection in the storyline emerged, I would replay the song repeatedly, hoping the performers would be able to remember the missing lines. Sometimes, while listening

to their own voices, the missing link would come right back to them. If the performer and I became convinced that was going to be impossible, I would ask him or her to give me any background information that would help me restore the poem as close as possible to its original. For instance, take a poem belonging to the family lyrics called "Nina-nana, my sick child," a lullaby that the poet had composed and performed for her only child, but had lost interest in it since her daughter had died more than 68 year ago. It proved to be impossible for the poet to remember the last stanza. During the recovery attempts of the poem, I asked her about the nature of the illness of her daughter, the time and place in which she was born and died, about her happiness when she gave birth to her and the grief when she lost her. The information consisted of her being born in late March and dying in mid-April in Jugomir, a village attached to Mount Veleçik, in Malësia e Madhe. The poet also informed me that, with her daughter's death, she lost the desire to continue living. Moreover, she gave me a valuable clue about the context of the poem. For quite some time after losing her daughter, whose name was Leze, she daydreamed about reuniting with her, hoping she would return in angel form. Since the poem had already a reasonable ending stanza, I asked her if it was possible that she had added the missing stanza after her daughter's death. She was not sure about that, but she assured me the last stanza was very important to her and to the poem. So based on the above information, I created in Albanian and then translated into English the following three lines as the conclusive stanza of the poem.

Return home
With the spring,
Nina-nana-o

I kept the form of the stanza consistent with the rest of the body of the poem, condensed the contextual information in similar ways that she had abridged hers, and gave it an ambiguous direction in terms of the possibility of being created after the loss of her child. Here is the poem in its final version after I added the seventh stanza:

Nina-nana,
My dearest child,
Nina-nana-o.

I pray
That you'll get better,
Nina-nana-o.

Mother shall
Always help you,
Nina-nana-o.

Get well
Beat this fever,
Nina-nana-o.

Grow wings
Become an eagle,
Nina-nana-o.

Drop sickness
Far off on Mount Veleçik,
Nina-nana-o.

Return home
With the spring,
Nina-nana-o.

During the translation of another poem, "Muji and the Three Witches," I encountered a much more complicated issue. The importance of this supernatural poem within the Albanian

oral poetry cycle is immense. It is one of the pillars of the legendary (kreshnik) poems. I followed similar procedures, with "Nina-nana, my sick child," but this was a lengthy poem of more than 200 lines, written in the traditional trochaic pentameter with an irregular rhyme scheme. If not translated precisely, the whole structure of the narrative poem would fall off its poetic balance. Aside from that, the reciter was unable to remember some essential lines, "and left out the key to breaking the spell of the golden goats, which is that they lose their magic if they drink human blood. Later in the recitation it becomes obvious to the reciter that he has erred, and he then, rather flustered, alters the ending to give the poem a different (and rather misogynistic) ending."[46] After doing what I could, I felt that I had no choice but to ask the Chair of my Dissertation Committee, Frederick Turner, for an unusual aid with this poem. This was not a hands-on consultation on the metrical form and rhyme patterns, as I had often sought for other poems. This time, I was forced to ask him to recreate the missing narrative of the poem. Turner, an oral poet, helped improvise "a few lines to repair the damage and gave a construction of the ending that made more sense without altering the general literal meaning."[47] Using contextual information on the poem provided by L. Rushaj and some other existing versions, we achieved this mid-poem stanza:

> Now they explain the secrets of the spell:
> “Three golden goats live in the highest mountain.
> They share the grass of Turks and infidels.

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[46] Turner, Frederick. “Translating Albanian Folk Poetry: a Collaborative Venture.” *Translation Review*, 2008: 58-64. p 59.

[47] Turner, Frederick. “Translating Albanian Folk Poetry: a Collaborative Venture.” *Translation Review*, 2008: 58-64.

> Their every lock of hair is purest gold,
> Their horns are solid bullion through and through;
> No one can touch them, still less capture them,
> For one who tried would be struck down by lightning.
> But if one could succeed, our powers are ended.
> One thing alone can break the three goats' magic:
> If they should learn to drink the blood of mortals."

In the spirit of reconstructive translation, we also decided to conclude the poem with the following three lines, designed to maintain the poetic power of the story without deviating from the philosophical lines of the poem as a whole:

> But when the cup goes round, this tale is told,
> The menfolk answer with a curse upon
> Whoever puts his trust upon a woman.

Nevertheless, it is my belief that poetic restorations or recreations should be used only under excruciating circumstances. But literary translation is an art that can either shape translators to be artists, or force them out of the translation war. What I mean by "war" is that literary translation is a war made up of many battles. If one has what it takes, translation is war that can be won. Yet even the most educated and experienced translators sometimes find themselves in positions where an artistic compromise is the only answer. One of the poems included in this collection, "The war dance," reminded me that there are a few substantive scholarly treatises on the translation of oral poems. I also re-educated myself on the fact that the limits of translating oral poetry are as real as the craft of translation itself. In other words, there are artistic expressions and poetic performances that occur outside the scope of the abbreviating possibilities. The poem:

THE WAR DANCE

O, Albania, bride on top of the cliffs,
You go to battles as if they were weddings.
The world wonders about your gunshots:
"Are they the groomsmen's or the bride's?"

In the weddings and the wars
Together stand those lutes and guns of yours.
When loud your "Liberty or Death" will peal,
The bride leads her groomsmen to the ordeal.

The noun *lute* in line six, "Together stand those lutes and guns of yours," is one of the uncomfortable compromises that I had to make. I used the English word *lute* as substitute for the Albanian name of the single-string instrument called *lahutë.* I made this decision fully aware that *lahuta* is not a *lute*. There are two other instruments, *çifteli* and *sharki*, that if called *lutes* would be a much closer translation. They are musical instruments that belong to the category of *lutes* that look and sound similar to the guitar, which people of the Western civilization played. *Lahuta,* for all its practical and poetic purposes, is more than a *lute*, more than an old Illyrian musical instrument. It symbolizes the instrument of "confession" to God and people. And since it is also a symbol of honor, it is safe to say that for the people of Malësia e Madhe, it is the epicenter of their cultural life. *Lahuta* is a noun that ultimately cannot be transplanted into another language. Why did I take the liberty to reduce a symbol of such importance from *lahutë* to *lute* in my translation? On one hand, my reasoning was that it would be wiser to repeat the same mistake many other scholars and translators have made in the past by calling *lahuta* a *lute*, than to give the English-speaking reader a name they cannot recognize. On the other hand, I

made sure to provide the audience with additional visual information, such as the photograph of Albanian oral poets and performers.

Since I had more to worry about in translating this poem than the known issue of the untranslatability of texts, let's turn the course of this document to how some choreographic and other cultural expressions of this poem could not be carried over from the Albanian language into English to my full satisfaction. The poem is not only linguistically simplified, but is also poetically overloaded with symbolism and metaphors. In other words, if the reader is not familiar with the central power of the poem, in terms of specific cultural, social, and historical aspects it intends to portray, its overall values would appear compromised. The poem belongs to the Albanian epic warlike dance as much as it does to the Albanian oral poetry cycle. Albanian scholars cannot say for sure whether the poem is more important to the dance or the dance to the poem. No logical elements of the poem can tell us whether the powerful metaphors such as "o, Albania, bride on top of the cliffs," or the unique and beautiful choreography of the dancers performing it, is more important. Moreover, the song clearly connects with the lyrical wedding dance genre. The lutes, the guns, the cliff tops, the simplicity with which they go war, led by the bride on her wedding day, are a combination of symbols much larger than the words in translation can communicate. With that in mind, I approached this poem as I have all the poems in this collection: making every effort that the lexicon and the linguistic structure are empowered by the philosophical and poetic underlining and enriched by the vivid imagery, literal landscape and estimated historical timeframe in which they might have been orally composed.

These songs, evidently, were difficult to translate to professional satisfaction, because they are truly essential to ethnographic values of the Malësia e Madhe and the entire Albanian

folk poetry. I gave my undivided attention to each poem, because they contribute something substantive to the field of world literature and specifically to the translation of Albanian oral poetry into English. In doing so, I was able to inject the epic flavors of the folk music, the choreography, the emotional expression of the performers and the participation of the audience without sacrificing the meaning and the central story line of the poems. Yet, I realize that these *sine qua non* difficulties are intrinsic realities that complement the very nature of oral poetry. Seeking absolute perfection in literary translation is like chasing a rainbow—no matter the intellect, approach, and desire of the translator— it always will keep a considerable distance from you, as if it worries that you could be the only flaw in its color formation.

CHAPTER 3

THE POEMS

PATRIOTIC SONGS

3.1 HOMAGE TO THE WARRIORS

When I take my lute to sing

Snow-peaks perch upon my string,

And the forest heights fall still

And the starry heavens chill

And the ice-fields and the crests

Come to sing the heroes' gests.

Words like water from the spring

Teach the heroes' deeds to sing;

Green-clad hillsides raise the call

Echoed from the mountain-wall.

Time harrows rocks and stones and all,

Yet heroes for the flag still fall;

The Cemi brook runs red with gore,

But their mothers will bear more.

They give birth to bravery,

Let the Alban eagles fly.

3.2 THE EAGLE OF ALBANIA

Mighty bird and mighty burden,
May your quills and pennons shine,
That you shall not be forgotten,
In our flag we set your sign.
In our hearts we set your scars,
Set your laughter, set your wars;
In a sunbeam's golden glory
We recall your glowing story…!

3.3 THE PLEDGE OF THE HILL-FOLK

This our vow we shall not fail,
Our high hills are not for sale:
We would die to guard the pale.

Man’s vow is God’s vow unseen.
Little do the Turk’s guns mean:
We’re the powder-magazine.

God’s vow is man’s vow exalted,
Earth by pure hearts’ salt is salted:
Flag-vow over earth is vaulted.

Oath to oath and hand to hand,
Mountain-snow on mountain-land:
Wherefore fights this Malsor-band?

Lightning-like, the Turks they scorn,
Die as if they’re being born,
By their faith and nation drawn.

3.4 THE CURSE

He who greets the occupier,

Blast his house with lightning-fire.

Weaver of his velvet bands,

May God cut off both his hands.

Knitter of the tyrant's hose,

Wither her arms that made his clothes.

Shkoder-man who helps those ones:

May his house beget no sons.

3.5 IN THE MOUNTAINS OF TARAMIS

In the heights of Taramis
Speaks the Aura of Malësisë.
I drink the mountains with my eyes,
I sing the hills where homeland lies,
I sing the skies the Aura flies:

"In the mountains where it snows
No doctor needs to show his nose,
Apothecaries we don't need,
No medicines at all, indeed:
Where at noon the sun won't burn,
Where winds dance with the waving fern,
Where the grasses sweetly sing,
Strawberries ripen in the spring,
Where the shepherd's song is merry,
Drinking milk with sweet strawberry
Iced with snow and berry-fresh,
That renews an old man's flesh,
Turns an old man to a young,
Makes his feet so swift and strong,

He climbs mountains all day long.

“Of other places I might speak,
With bogs and ditches dank and bleak,
Where barren wastelands breed disease,
Malarias and maladies,
And medicine’s the people’s ease.
All my words are good and true:
Where sick sheep drool and sick goats spew,
People never can get well;
Where the sky is dark as hell,
And mosquitoes, ticks and fleas
And horseflies rule the leafless trees,
And many-footed insects suck,
And leeches grip you in the muck,
And children shriek “Kuku nanë!”
Outdoors and indoors every day:
Better for them that they had not
Such parents as would let them rot.

“Of city people I might tell,
But they self-advertise too well.

They eat less, it is very true,
But they have so much less to do.
They are so scared that they will die,
They live where doctors are nearby.
No young man here is such a chump,
He knows a good place from a dump,
Summers he hikes up in the hills,
Comes down in winter from the chills,
That's why our youth is strong and hale,
Not short and skinny, thin and frail;
They do not lack mustache or beard,
And their looks are justly feared,
They make you feel a feeble beast—
They don't need money in the least!"
I won't go on—I've said my piece;
If you don't live here in Malësi,
Nothing's easy, even dying,
You should give up even trying:
Hear the Aura's final plea:
"You might as well go peacefully,
And hand in hand, as blind fools see,
Go drown yourselves down in the sea."

3.6 MY HOME VILLAGE

Homeland, do not hang your head,
Though I left that night, and fled:
I bequeathed to you my house,
One day I'll return, to rest
Forever in your gentle breast.

Lovely Qeparo, your rill
Runs down between hill and hill,
Crowned with your last mountain height,
Bosom clothed with snow so white
You are Circe in the night.

You are to life, as life to love.
The brook's lips kiss the rocks above.
Your body, comet-shaped, streams light,
The whole world envies you, and I
Must return to you to die.

3.7 MILKING-TIME

Milk sweet, milk sweet!

Pail full from the sheep’s warm teat.

Milk sweet, milk sweet

From the valleys where they eat.

Milk sweet, milk sweet

Where they dream upon their feet.

Milk sweet, milk sweet,

Youth’s and age’s living heat:

Milk sweet! Milk sweet!

3.8 CHEESE

Bright curd, white curd,

With the finest rennet stirred,

Round, white, well-stored,

All the town will get the word!

3.9 BUTTER

Churn, churn, churnabumble,

Pour the milk and hear it tumble,

Churn, churn, churnabumble,

Sweetly let the plunger rumble.

Churn, churn, churnabumble,

Winking eyeballs from the mold,

Churn, churn, churnabumble,

Secret to the shepherd told,

Churn, churn, churnabumble:

Butter is the shepherd’s gold.

3.10 SHEPHERD'S SONG

Why, oh why, does the shepherd cry?
Cry, Shepherd, cry:
The wolf is in the fold, that's why;
Cry, shepherd, cry.
The teeming ewes, throat-bitten, die;
Cry, shepherd, cry;
The unborn lambs are lost for aye,
Cry, shepherd, cry.
It bit his fingers off today,
Cry, shepherd, cry,
So now his flute he'll never play,
Cry, shepherd, cry.

The shepherd sings on hill and dale,
Joy to us, oh joy;
He's got fresh ewes to fill his pail:
Joy to us, oh joy.
Udder-milk he'll mix with soil,
—Joy to us, oh joy—
Glue his fingers whole and hale,

Joy to us, oh joy.

Now he’ll play his flute so well,

Joy to us, oh joy,

Sheep will bleat, woods tell the tale,

Joy to us, oh joy!

3.11 THE PROUD ROOSTER

Twelve red hens were dancing, dancing,
Dancing, dancing, twelve red hens;
Picked a bride for that proud rooster,
For that rooster picked a bride:
Chose for him an ancient chicken
Ancient chicken chose for him.
But that rooster lost his temper,
Lost his temper, that proud cock.
“I don’t want that ancient chicken,
No old chicken do I want.”
Cock-a-doodle, cock-a-deedle,
Cock-a-deedle, cock-a-doodle.

Twelve red hens were dancing, dancing,
Dancing, dancing, twelve red hens.
Picked a bride for that proud rooster,
For that rooster picked a bride.
Now they chose a sweet young pullet,
Sweet young pullet now they chose.
Then the proud cock was right merry,

Merry was that proud cock then.

"How I love that sweet young pullet,

How I love that sweet young pullet,

She is just the bride for me,

She is just the bride for me."

Cock-a-deedle, cock-a-doodle,

Cock-a deedle, cock-a-doodle.

HEROIC TALES

3.12 DEDË LUL TOMA

Dedë Lul Toma, without peer,
Splendid in his boots and gear,
Flies across the rock-ribbed fells
To the hall where the king dwells.
He plays a song of grief and woe.
How his eyes roll to and fro!—
Grinding millstones scarce turn so.
"King, it's you I've come to see.
Just a few words, two or three,
I have now that must be said:
I have heard that you have wed."
"The seven seas my witness be,
Your daughter truly married me."
"In our code is not implied
Two men marry but one bride.
Without wedding feast and banns,
No woman can become a man's.

In our tradition no girl may
Choose to give herself away."
He put his hand upon his "Ten,"
Ten times he stopped his firing then,
Left the king lifeless on the floor,
Left him dead forevermore.
On the king's table blood still flows;
"You are surrounded," Toma knows,
Around the room his sharp eye ranges,
He tears a door from off its hinges,
Strikes one man down and kicks another;
Till shattered men are heaped together,
And flees across the mountain's limb—
No bullet can catch up with him.
At last he halts, somewhere, nowhere;
His conscience sits in judgment there:
"How could I do this dreadful thing?
What shame shall these dark doings bring?
How could I kill our only king?
In such a slaughter what is good,
To drench the king's hall with his blood?
And if I venture home, I fear

My mother's dreadful curses there:
She'll give no place to make a stand,
King's men will come swiftly, and
Take my wife and children; then
All my lands will go to ruin.
My brother Gjergj they'll cruelly hale
Through streets behind a horse's tail,
Running a gauntlet I deserved."
Now Dedë all his courage nerved,
And so surrendered to the Bey,
Who was a good man, by the way.
He offered neither blows nor shame;
At his command a droshky came
To carry Dedë straightway to Vlorë
Where wise physicians might explore
How to heal Dedë forevermore.
Some thought him dead, condoled with Gjergj:
"Your pity, friends, pray do not urge;
Until I see him in the grave,
I know the Bey his crime forgave
And won't betray my brother brave:
He feigned Dedë's death, his life to save."

3.13 KOLË’S PEERLESS WOMEN

Mountain-man, young Gjin Ndreca,
Long had been a troublemaker.
Now he raided Kolë Marku,
Broke the gate of Kolë Marku,
Broke into his sheepfold seeking
Anything thought worth his taking:
Copper sheep-bells from the rams,
Tender lambs beneath their dams,
Oxen from the manger’s side,
Kolë’s son’s newly-wedded bride.
So on market-day there came
Kolë’s fair women, high in fame;
Gjin Ndreca they confronted,
Him who had their virtue hunted:
“Mountain thing, you flee in vain
Those whose honor you would stain.”
Said Dranë Noja—dear God, hear her!—
“My duty’s in this derringer.”
Like a millstone see her spin,
Draw a gun and shoot that Gjin.

Gjin Ndreca little kenned
Woman's hand would be his end;
Gjin Ndreca knew the rocks,
Knew the mountains like a fox,
Knew a fighting-man's quick fire:
Did not know a woman's ire.
Comes a wagon with an order:
Dranë must come to court in Shkoder,
"Long life to you, your Honor, surely,
Make your judgments well and truly.
Ask in Breg të Matës, Gorre;
Ask about Ndreca's story.
Ask them what he did to us,
Ask and then consider thus:
Oft he stole an ox or cow,
Never honor, until now.
Mine was the first he stole," she said,
"So I live and he is dead.
What use bullets, but to kill
Him who would your honor steal.
Judge against us and you will
Get one for yourself as well."

3.14 YLBER

When that wife was made a widow,
God had left her ten poor orphans,
Nine boys and a girl, they say.
Hard it was alone to raise them,
Begging door to door she fed them,
Clothed with thorn-snagged wool their bodies:
God sent hardships every day.
She begs, but nothing do they give her,
Fatherless, they're bound to die.

Mourning Dove asks her poor orphans,
"Listen, fatherless, say I:
To the market we'll take Ylber,
Offer Ylber to a buyer,
That nine live, let one be lost,
For if not we starve and die:
I beg, but never find a giver."
Burning, grieving, they agree
To take and sell the youngest boy:
So that whole night passed away.

Early the mother rose next day,
Dressed him pleasing to the eye,
To the bazaar took him away,
And in the merchant’s hands she dropped the boy.

But seeing him, he would not buy.
Along now came the new lord Bey,
Selim Spahiu was his name.
Selim came close up to the boy
And loved the beauty of his face.
“Wretched mother, what’s his price?”
“Three hundred ducats,” said the dame.
From his pouch he counted then
Three hundred ducats in a trice:
Selim took the poor lad home.

Seizing the gold, in tears she came
Where the other children waited.
With what care she raised those children!—
Bought them land and lawns and garden,
Built them dwellings, house and mansion;
Eight fine brothers grew to manhood,

Swiftly God had made them wealthy.
But the girl became a beauty,
Snow-White the Fair was her nickname;
Distant soon had spread her fame:
To the Magyar prince it came.
A mighty army now he gathered,
Broke into the widow's homestead,
Slew all eight sons she had mothered,
Seized Snow-White and, when he'd gone,
Left the widow all alone.

Poor woman, she can't stop her shrieking,
Night and day she weeps unceasing
Till both eyes are stricken blind.
Nightmare was it just to hear her,
Lips agape and unconfined.

Thirty drovers happened by;
Hearing her, up spoke their chief:
"In the name of God, dear comrades,
I'll go in that house, or try,
For the screaming never ceases."

In the house amid the ashes
There he found her in her grief.
"In God's name who gave you life,
What great trouble can afflict you
That your crying never ceases,
That your eyes are stricken blind?"

Hear now how she turns to answer!
"Cease I cannot, such need drives me:
Ten poor orphans God had left me,
Begging door to door I raised them,
Such a hard life God had sent me,
With my orphans bound to die.
My youngest I must take to market,
Sold him for three hundred ducats;
So the nine were saved thereby.
I bought land and field and garden,
Built them dwellings, house and mansion,
Eight fine sons and one fair daughter.

"But God sent the Magyar Prince
And he fell upon the homestead,

Put my eight sons to the slaughter,
Sacrilegious, seized my daughter,
And with him went then my daughter,
I—Mourning Dove—left all alone.
Young man, in God's name, might you be
A traveler?"
And he replied:
"Yes, a drover's life I lead."
Now she roused and spoke again:
"For God's sake who gave you being,
Since you go from town to town,
Tell my griefs to everyone—
Best, if you see him, to my son."

Now he got up to be going,
Told his comrades everything,
Told the tale from town to town,
Till he came to a tall inn,
Got a drink and then began
Telling the tale to everyone.
A young man leapt then to his feet
Came up to the storyteller,

Begged him that he might repeat
All that had been said and done—
Had the Prince cut down his brothers,
Had he snatched his sister's honor,
Left his mother all alone?

Aye, says the drover.—What of Selim?
Said Ylber to his foster-father:
"I can't beg you to release me,
I cost you a mighty ransom:
From my home you can forbid me
But my life would then oppress me
If I can't avenge my brothers,
Pay him back for my lost sister,
If I cannot see my mother."

Hear how Selim made his answer:
"Love bids me live with you forever
But I have no heart to keep you
From your mother's homestead, hold you
From avenging sister or brother."

Then the lad donned fine apparel,
Selim saddles him a courser,
Places in his hand a sword,
Holds back tears and says farewell;
Hand to hand those brave men part.
Selim offers one more word:
“All I gave you I absolve you:
This I swear before the Lord.”

To his homestead then rode Ylber,
Found his mother still in mourning:
They embraced—such grief and yearning—
And he took her to the wise man,
And his mother’s eyes got better.

Two maids hired he for his mother;
Then set out to seek the Prince,
Enters the Prince’s battlements,
Finds his sister, knows her face,
Takes her, they say, in his embrace.

Gathering herself, she spoke:

"Brother, came you to take me away
And our brothers' blood repay?"
Ylber had but this to say:
"With such thoughts I have come hither."
Now the answer of his sister:
"For that I have an easy mind."

Then she gave him food and drink,
But she drugged her brother's wine,
And as instant as a wink
Sleep took him a prisoner.

To the window runs the sister,
And the prince, arriving, sees,
Runs to him, falls to her knees,
Trembling, gathers words and speaks:
"All for you I've caught my brother,
Do with him what is your pleasure;
For he would cut us asunder."

Then he finds the sleeping Ylber,
Manacles his hands and feet there,

Kicks him in the ribs, and taunts him:
"Don't you know your blackest day?"
As cut by sword, sleep fell away;
Ylber felt the tight chain pain him,
Knew his sister had betrayed him.

Snow-White no more, the sister said:
"You must cut off Ylber's head:
He would cut me off from you."
The Prince looked in her eye and said:
"Ylber's too young for me to slay—
I will not cut off his head.
I'll throw him in the stalls instead:
Mustangs will tear him till he's dead."
Hark how Ylber's mind now tricked them:
Sideways he lay in the mustangs' manger
And they neither bit nor kicked him:
Perhaps the Prince had thought he would.

But this sister rose up early,
Went to see how he had fared.
Here's what she flung at her lover:

"Ylber lives yet in your stable:
Had you heeded what I said,
'Tween his feet would be his head."
Looking askance at her he answered:
"This night will be cold and bitter.
To the cherry tree I'll rope him
Like a dog, in rain and snow:
Soon the boy's soul will escape him,
And your will accomplished so."

To the cherry tree he ties him,
Cold indeed the night God sent him,
Never ceased the bitter speaking
Of the rain and sleet and snow.

But God willed he should be rescued:
For the sister of the Prince
Rose up early on that morning,
Through the open window looking,
Faced the cold wind's violence;
But instead of cold felt warming,
Leaped out of the open window,

Wondered why earth did not wince.

Then and there she questions Ylber,
What he'd pay to save his life.
Ylber's closed his eyes, and spoken:
"I still have my strength and life."
Seizing him, the princess answers:
"If you give God's word forever
That you will make me your wife,
From that word will spring a lover
And together spring your life.
For us both I wish to save you,
And to pay for your eight brothers—
Life should not be caught and broken."

Ylber swears before the Lord:
"If in truth you save my life,
Were you blind, you'll be my wife."

Now the princess in her cunning
Drags a stump to the cherry-tree,
Throws a sheet on it, in seeming

Some poor prisoner to be.
Then she grasps his hand and leads him
To her chamber secretly;
Goes then to the Prince her brother
And with a cold look takes his eye.
"That boy you tied to the cherry-tree
Is dead—I hope it gives you joy.
Now let me too have my pleasure:
Let me take his corpse to bury
In the Turkish cemetery."
Sweet and sour he gives her leave.

Cunning still, his sister planned it:
Set the tree-stump in a wagon,
Interred it in a Turkish grave
So no man would ever find it;
Thus the day began and ended.

Gaining in the human battle
With the powers of night and darkness,
Wise, the princess had arranged it,
Sets a sword in Ylber's hand.

Life in him burns more and more:
“That prince who debased my sister,
Must be stricken from the land.”
Flies he to the Prince’s door.

First the Prince’s kicks he rendered,
Then he bade the man to stand;
With the sword his neck he sundered,
And the head rolled on the ground.
Like a stranded fish, now Ylber
Felt a darkness choking him:
And with fish-oil drenched his sister,
Laid to her hair a burning brand
So that she was burned to ashes.

Then he weds the Prince’s sister,
Burns his palace, breaks his walls;
Safely they go to his mother,
Tell her “Your eight sons are paid;
Now in peace we’ll live together.”

3.15 WORD SPREADS IN ISTANBUL

Noc Mark Deda with this call
Curdles the peace of Istanbul:
“I’ll not give up my guns alive,
My guns I’ll not give up alive!
I’ll wash the dales in blood that day
They come to take my guns away.”
Young man with a double chin
Noc Mark’s house would enter in;
His land is bony, the night is dark,
They beat the door of good Noc Mark.
Three deputies and one gendarme
Bellow at the sleeping farm:
“Noc Mark Deda, step outside,
Let’s see your actions match your pride!
Orders our commandant gave:
Bring you in dead or alive.”
“Give me five minutes more to sleep:
Tonight a holy night I keep.”
Holy nights can swiftly pass:
Noc escapes, hides in his grass.

"God and St. Nicholas, may I
Survive their rage and see them die:
For my father I don't fear,
He is in his ninetieth year
And his time has come to die.
I'll avenge him—if not I,
Then my son or his son's son,
Till we've cut ten heads for one."

3.16 ZEK JAKINI

Gunshots echoed over the sea:
Murders in Trush, the word had run.
Zek Jakini took his gun,
Hastened to the butchery.

No blood-brother lacked his aid:
That was not how Zek was made.
He met three Malësor-men, consulted:
Challenged Ali Pasha then:
That the Bey be more insulted,
Sent a woman, not a man.
Ali summons his vizier;
With the horn he always carries,
Calls up all his janissaries,
Beckons Kul Bektelin there.
Soon enough Bektelin came,
With his golden sword of fame.
And Bektelin came to Trush,
This the city he would crush.

But Jakini fears him not—

Son of a fiery patriot:

Grabs his rifle by the breech:

“God give just deserts to each!”

And now parley Kol and Zek:

“Death is rushing on us here—

Let us fight like Tuç and Lek,

Let us be sung like brave Gjinlek.”

Zek tells Kol Gjorit, his friend:

“Tight aim on Harop Sokolin,

Keep the muzzle on a bowline.”

(Poor Martini-gun, to send

Many a brave man to his end.)

Kol replies to Zek Jakini:

“On his forehead hold your aim,

Hold it steady, shoot the same.”

(Poor Martini, poor Martini,

Killing is a weary game.)

Kek’s old mother screams “O woe!

Is he dead, and must I go

With no-one for to bake the dough?”

Fear not, mother, have no grief!
Zek slew all his foes, in brief:
Young Sokolin, the sharif,
And Bektelin, their great chief.

3.17 SUNG ACROSS THE SHOULDER

Hark to what the grapevine cries:
Tells Gjokova to arise,
Calls across the west wind's bluster:
Peja and Rugovë to muster!
Here's a hint from one who knows:
Troopship landing many foes,
Pouring out as black as crows.
Devil-may-care Zef Toma, see,
Was to hang on the mulberry tree—
For, they say, he did good work,
Avenged his uncles on the Turk--
As if to obey their order,
Rode his flying horse to Shkoder,
Where he saw them tie the noose;
So they scarcely could refuse
To grant his last wish—he made known:
"May the General alone
On the scaffold by the tree
Be the man who shall hang me."
This proud Pasha must agree.

Now the noose, between two faces,

Like a zero, quick, Zef places

On the Pasha’s neck, and snap!

Kicks the lever of the trap.

What fine doctor, on that deck,

Can repair the Pasha’s neck?

Zef leaps on his flying horse,

Homeward rides, and so of course—

Rugovë and Peja! Go to work

To save him from the crow-black Turk!

THE EPIC MATTER OF MUJI

3.18 THE MARRIAGE OF HAJKUNA

When Petr was promoted to a general
He wrote a letter fine and to the point
And sent it off to Muji in Judbinë.
“You are the famous Gjeto-Basho Muji.
I am so minded to marry me a wife.
If you will give me Hajkuna for my bride,
A merchant ship with moorage I will give you,
And in it there are seven market-stalls;
Its hold is full of finest merchandise,
Which you may sell wherever you may wish.
And you shall have a holy casket too
And in it is a chalice all of gold
And a clock circled with a golden serpent
With an enormous diamond in its mouth.
That diamond can illuminate a room
So that you do not need to light the lamps,
The diamond truly being lamp enough.

And in addition you shall be my kin—
If you but give Hajkuna to be mine."
Now Muji gets the letter and he reads it
And as he does so Muji grinds his teeth
And his hand finds its way toward his sword.
Halil watches his brother's agitation
And so when Muji puts the letter down
Halil strokes his mustache and speaks aloud:
"In the name of God who created you,
Brother, tell me whence that letter came
That made you grind your teeth like a rockslide
And caused your hand to wander to the sword."
Muji stroked his mustache and thus replied:
"Now God had better kill that General Petr
For what his mind has prompted him to do.
A letter fine and to the point he sent me—
Listen what he wrote in it to me.
If I give him Hajkuna for his wife
He will give me a merchant ship with moorage
That has in it seven market-stalls
And a hold full of finest merchandise,
And I may sell wherever I may wish;

He will give us that miraculous ark
That has in it the wondrous clock of gold,
And round the clock a golden snake has coiled
With an enormous diamond in its mouth
So bright that it will light up all the night
So that there is no need to light the lamps."
Halil strokes his mustache and thus replies:
"If you will listen, hear what I advise:
A simple switch could do the trick for us.
He wants our honor; we, though, will take his.
Let us accept whatever he now offers—
Except Hajkuna never will be his.
Let us make these conditions for the wedding:
He must bring all he offered in advance;
When he arrives ashore, among the bridesmaids
Must be his sister, the Countess Gjelinë.
We give them honor and fair entertainment,
Then when it's time the wedding party leaves
We place our General Petr at the head;
Between each man of his, set one of ours;
Then we will let them know what's on our mind.
O yes indeed there will be one fine marriage;

But I'm the one who'll marry fair Gjelinë
While our Hajkuna kicks the man and leaves him."
So Muji's letter flies to General Petr's hand:
"When the day comes for you to claim your bride,
We will receive three hundred of your guests.
Let fair Countess Gjelinë be one of them.
Come and enjoy our city of Judbinë."
Muji set out to give his daughter honor
And called the bridal helper to prepare her.
Halil, her younger brother, comes on in
To the fresh-painted white room where she sits
Gives her the wedding-raiment thick with gold
That General Petr had brought by for her.
When she puts on the garments, how she screams!—
"From whence has come such fancy clothes as these?"
Halil strokes his mustache and says to her:
"Hajkuna, there is nothing you need fear;
Much riches we have won, and more will win,
With the Countess Gjelinë, whom I will marry."
And then Hajkuna understood it all.
When it was time the wedding guests would leave,
Muji prepared three hundred of his men.

After the farewell handshakes, each fell in
Behind his counterpart, ready for battle.
General Petr was the first in line;
Behind him Talo Budalina stood.
The Count of Senjit was the second there,
Behind him there was Desde Osman Aga,
The third in line was Limo Bajraktari,
And there behind him, Zuko Bajraktari—
Three hundred picked men matched against three hundred.
They kept them company a little way.
Now Talo Budalina spoke these words:
"Hear me, and hear me well, dear General Petr:
Your waistcoat is so beautifully made,
Three hundred of our men have followed it
Who mean to play at war with you today."
Ah, Petr stroked his mustache then and said:
"That is a problem easily resolved"
And dips into his pouch and scoops out ducats
And tossing them upon the dusty ground
Tells Talo he can pick them up himself.
Poor Talo! He was not a wealthy man.
He lusted for those ducats on the ground

And so he bent to pick the money up.
And now behold how quickly Petr ran!
But Talo, swifter still, caught up with him.
Hear now what General Petr said:
"If you will spare my life then yours is made."
Talo strokes his mustache and answers him:
"By now your wedding party is all dead,
And your Countess Gjelinë, most like, with child,
And our Hajkuna flaunts your wedding garments,
And Muji and Halil possess your merchant ship.
Since you are proven so unworthy, I
Am going to let you go and keep your life,
But you must vow that you will change your name,
Or you had better start to dig your grave.
And you must go away at once in exile,
And be a commoner with common folk
In a strange place far from your kith and kin."
Now Petr's blood, at this, has turned to water,
But he has no chance but to take the offer.
Thus Petr learned the honor of Albania,
That it cannot be bought, its customs trampled;
Leave us alone, and we will like you well.

3.19 MUJI AND THE THREE WITCHES

The daughter of the King had been betrothed
In marriage to our Gjeto-basho Muji.
He's picked out thirty men to greet the King
And bring the bride in triumph to her wedding.
Sokol Halili was their chosen leader.
But Muji held them back and said these words.
"In God's name who created you, mark well:
Do not dismount while you pass through the mountains,
Do not allow your horses loose to play;
No one should dance, though it be customary;
You are forbidden to fire off your guns.
For mountain-witches live about the passes,
Whose magic can turn man and horse to stone."
And so the wedding-guests mount to their saddles
And set off on their journey to the King.

They passed safe through the mountains of the witches,
Remembering that they were not to dance
Nor loose the horses on the grass to play,
And draw back on their bridles as he told them;

And not one shot they fired at rock or tree,
And safe and sound they came then to the King.

They fetched the bride and set out for Judbinë,
And when they reached the mountains of the witches
No man dismounted there to celebrate.
This was not lost on Desde Ali Aga:
“I can’t believe I see what I am seeing:
You aren’t singing, don’t get down to shoot.
As wedding guests we often cross this pass;
We always loosed our horses to go play,
We always took the time for target-shooting,
But nothing ill did ever yet befall.”
Now when the wedding party heard his words
They let their horses loose to roll and play,
Started to dance more merrily than ever,
And soon their singing rose until it echoed,
Nor was the target-practice left undone.
It was not long, O no not long at all
Before there was a whistling in the trees,
Rising to shrieks in which the witches came,
And turned the wedding-party all to stone

And all their horses too. The three weird sisters
Pursued the bride, seized her and flew away.

Three days have passed, and three nights turned to dawn,
And in Judbinë no wedding-guests have come;
Something is burning now in Muji's blood.
"So what in darkness' name befell my guests?"
He dressed himself and girded on his belt
And mounted his white horse, and rode away,
Turning his mount toward the witches' mountains.

High, high in the mountains he has traveled,
Too deep, too deep, into the witches' realm;
He finds a hooked branch there and ties his horse
And carefully he now surveys the forest,
Hoping to catch the movements of the witches.
At length he spies a narrow little path,
And Muji took that passage through the trees
That led him to a spring with a wood flume
Where Muji stopped and hid himself away.
Some time now passed, not so much time at all,
And to that spring came down a fair young maiden.

Muji steps forth and thus addresses her:
“In God’s name who created you, tell me,
What power brought you here into these mountains?
For whom do you come here to fetch this water?”
How sore, how sore indeed the girl now sighs:
“A curse’d God must have created me.
He had pledged me to Çetobasho Muji,
And thirty groomsmen he had sent for me,
And in these valleys we had stopped to rest;
The groomsmen then began to dance and play,
Started to sing their songs of celebration,
Fired off their guns at targets here and there.
It wasn’t long, indeed not long at all,
Before the crags and forest started shrieking,
And out of that three mountain witches came.
They turned the happy groomsmen all to stone,
They turned the very horses too to stone,
And then they seized me and they brought me here.
Now I must live with them and care for them,
And carry water, work as their fire-tongs.”

Now Muji stroked his mustache and responded.

"If you saw Muji, would you recognize him?"
She puts her hand upon her breast and bows:
"How could poor I pick out the great lord Muji,
When I have never seen him with my eyes?
But judging by my mother's words about him,
I wager he who speaks to me is he."
That very moment Muji laughed aloud.
"Indeed, my lady, I'm your very Muji.
If I enjoy the good luck that has marked me,
I'll find some way to bring you to Judbinë;
But you will have to listen to me closely.
When evening comes and you have set their table,
Make sure all three of them are sitting down,
Then ask them where the magic spell is hidden.
If you can then escape them with your life—
For they will either kill you or they'll tell you—
If worse comes, I'll be hidden in the attic—
Tomorrow at the same time meet me here."
She took her pails of water and returned.

The youngest witch looks in her eyes and asks:
"What took you so much time, my little beauty?"

With hand on breast the brave girl now replies:
“With all this rain that’s fallen in the mountains,
The water’s muddy, and I had to strain it.”
Soon now the evening started to get dark.
The bride has cleaned and set the witches’ table;
With hand on breast she now begins to speak.
“By this fair table, sacred to three great ladies,
I beg you, tell me where your spell is hidden.”
At this the eldest witch fell in a frenzy,
The middle witch gave her a cruel kick,
The youngest spat on her—but all three said:
“Your beauty, little one, has saved your life.”

Now they explain the secrets of the spell:
“Three golden goats live in the highest mountain.
They share the grass of Turks and infidels.
Their every lock of hair is purest gold,
Their horns are solid bullion through and through;
No one can touch them, still less capture them,
For one who tried would be struck down by lightning.
But if one could succeed, our powers are ended.
One thing alone can break the three goats’ magic:

If they should learn to drink the blood of mortals."

Now Muji's bride told him of all of this,
And told him also that the witches' spell
Keeps her within these mountains, or she dies.
And Muji stroked his mustache, and he said:
"You'll see. Soon you will be in my serai."
He gives his carrier-pigeon to his bride,
And now he's mounted on his yearling horse,
And near-berserk, he gallops to Judbinë—
Ah, what a killer's face he had on then!—
But turned aside, and went on to his grange,
And gets up on the roof and loads his cannon,
And fires it so the whole land echoes wide.
They heard it in Judbinë and in Kraj too
And everybody gathered at his gate.
He chose from them the best three hundred men
And from the rooftop he commenced to speak:
"Fetch hunting dogs and horses, all of you.
Three wild goats there are that graze the mountain
Pastures of the Turks and infidels.
Their hair is spun out of the finest gold,

Their horns are solid bullion through and through.
If anyone mistakenly kills one of them,
I'll cut his head off, roll it down the mountain,
Because we need to take those goats alive."

And now he leads them to the distant heights;
Behind him ride the silent warriors,
And after them the packhorses and dogs.
And to the witches' mountain now they came.
When Muji reached the chosen battlefield
He gave the signal to surround the meadow,
So that the goats were cut off from the water.
Then they positioned all the dogs and horsemen,
And so a fearful massacre began.
The goats pried off the heads of fifty men,
But now the goats were thirsty, could not drink.
They slaughtered fifty more, but still the stream
Was blocked by men of Kraj and of Judbinë.
Fifty more died, but now at last the goats,
For whom their thirst was heavier than gold,
Quenched it by drinking of the blood of men.
At once the spell was broken, and with ease

He ropes the goats, ties them behind his horse,
And leads them back in triumph to Judbinë.

And soon the witches felt their power wane,
And went to find the goats from which it came;
They leap from rock to rock, from peak to peak,
Until they find their golden goats are gone.
Then a good thought comes to Muji's bride.
She sends a bird to Muji with a message
That the three witches' powers now start to curdle.
And Muji gets the news, and so at last
Meets with the three weird sisters face to face.

"For these my people you have turned to stone,
For those my own fine horses that you froze,
And for that bride that you have stolen from me,
I in return have tamed your golden goats."
The witches burn at this, but can say only:
"If you might kindly give us back our goats,
We will return your men to what they were,
Restore your horses, and give back your bride."
But Muji strokes his mustache and replies:

"I do not care a fig for men or bride,
And I cannot give back your sacred goats,
Having seen nothing half so beautiful."

Hear what the youngest witch now finds to do:
She goes down on her knees before the master,
Tears in her eyes and begging on her tongue,
Seizes his hands and puts them to her face
And prays for their return. Now, like the goats,
Muji is tamed, and lets the goats go free.
And to the eternal mountains go the witches,
Restore the goats to their high pastures green,
And then they lead the bride back to his door,
And greet him with the groomsmen and the horses,
And so the bride embraces him at last,
And the three witches get back all their powers.

But when the cup goes round, this tale is told,
The menfolk answer with a curse upon
Whoever puts his trust upon a woman.

COURTSHIP, FLIRTATION, AND LOVE

3.20 "SWEET, WHERE WERE YOU LINGERING?"

"Sweet, where were you lingering?"
"By the window, embroidering."
"If next morning is good weather,
Let's pick raspberries together."
Girl and boy, like flower and flower,
Meet within a shady bower.
Boy is happy, girl is grieving.
"Sweet, what sobs are these you're heaving?"
"Youth, good cause I have for sorrow:
I must start to pack tomorrow,
Join the caravan on the way
To the flatlands far away.
Wretched I, that must leave you—
Wretched you, what will you do
In the mountains' snow and rain,
Lonely, when will we meet again?
And the winter presses so,

Boreas begins to blow,

No-one there to make your bed,

No-one to make sure you're fed,

No-one to hold your body dear—"

"Sweetheart, sweetheart, never fear:

I will follow with my sheep,

Down into the valleys deep;

When I need you, I won't wait,

Make a cabin by your gate,

Fire my gun ten times when I

Need to have your sweet self nigh;

In the cabin, just we two,

All the world in me and you,

We will set the heights afire,

Mountains blazing higher and higher,

But our love will bring the spring,

Bring the leaf and flowering!"

3.21 “WHERE SHALL WE MEET?”

“Tell me, where’s your private bower?”
“By the river, by the cherry,
Shaded by the rowanberry,
Where the scent of melon-flower
Mingles with the rose’s power.”
“Mrikë Paragon, give me
Those red lips and cheeks I see.”
“I dare not, they’ve set out sentries
Guarding all my house’s entries.
That’s my husband’s work, that jack,
May he choke till he turns black,
May a cannon crush his wick,
What I give him make him sick.”
Mrikë Paragon, whose calves
Make men fall apart in halves,
To the Pasha takes her claim.
“I have not the Pasha’s fame,
I am Mrs. Whatshisname—“
“Whatshisname, that piping oaf?—
Where did he get this sugar-loaf?”

"I'm a Paragon, from Shkrel."

"If I'd seen you first, know well

You'd have servants twenty-one,

And a palace of fine stone,

Softest muffins you would eat,

In our mountainside retreat.

But I couldn't leave you here—

All the town would kiss you, dear."

3.22 BEAUTY WITH A WHITE SHAWL

"Hey, beauty in your milk-white shawl,
Have those breasts budded out at all?"
"They started just a week ago,
A week, I think, maybe a year.
They've got bad habits as they grow,
They're hard, and they stick out to here.
My bodice chafes them, and they flow
With sherbet if you touch them, so."

"Now won't you give some to the squire,
Some of that sweet stuff to me?"
"I'll save it for a boy with fire,
Young, unmarried, young and free,
Someone who will rise much higher,
Who sings and plays his flute for me."

3.23 "MILLER, MILLER"

"See, miller, see!
Miller, look at me.
Make this night your special night,
Grind my wheat for me!"
"Look, pretty girl,
Sorry, pretty girl,
My grindstone's got no water,
No grinding there will be."

"See, miller, see,
Lay your eyes on me,
Isn't it a pretty sight,
And for you it's free."
"Ah, pretty girl,
What a pretty girl,
With those eyes so dark and bright
You have magicked me."

"See, miller, see,
Miller, look at me!

Let my eyes be yours tonight,

Grind my wheat for me."

"Oh, pretty girl,

Pretty, pretty girl,

You have made my grindstone sweat,

It will grind your wheat, and yet

As fine as fine can be!"

3.24 TWO BEAUTIES

Two beauties go down to the well,
One’s a woman, one’s a girl.
“Stop there, woman, talk to me,
Find me a bride for company,
Find me my bride of fantasy,
And I’ll give my holster, see,
And my watch of filigree,
Gun with grips of ivory.”
“Calm down, boy, don’t be so rash,
Keep your guns and your fine trash.
I, or she you want, will meet you.”
“If you’re human, I entreat you,
Come together where I’ll greet you—
Once is not as good as twice.”
“Yes, I know you’d find that nice;
But two melons in one hand
Is more than you, young man, could stand,
Hand can’t cut and knife can’t sever,
Squeezed between us you would shiver
Seven years in quartain fever,

And there is no doctor ever
Who could cure that foolish lover."
"If it's written I must die,
In your laps then let me lie,
Let your little mouths be speaking
Poetry for our leave-taking,
And your black eyes weeping, aching,
While your white hands close my eyes—
And, though dead, I would arise!"

3.25 BEAUTY AT THE DOOR

"Beauty, beauty, at your door,
Make me happy one time, or
I will curse you twelve times more:
May your oxen die in spring,
May your land lack managing,
May your man be quarrelling,
May your cow die while you're milking,
May your sheep die while you're shearing,
May your guard dog die a-barking,
And your lambs a-gamboling,
Calves while drinking at the spring,
May your horse die cantering,
And your house burn down in Fall,
If you won't give me your all,
May God cripple you withal;
Ease me not while I am young,
May God pull out your eyes and tongue."
"Little sparrow, little fellow,
May your God send you to Hell-O."

3.26 “HEY, GIRL”

“Give me a glance of that bright eye!
Or may your lusts be crushed and die,
May fevers catch you in the spring,
No health may winter, summer bring;
Give me that eye, or may your friend
Come to a miserable end,
Your attic cock choke in mid-crow,
Your oxen die before the plow;
Give me a touch of that white neck,
Or may your fields all turn to rock,
Your house a flooded meadow where
Folk come to fill their buckets there;
Give me that neck, or truly may
Wasting sickness bear you away
(Despite what doctors do or say):
And for a mattress you’ll have hay,
And for a quilt, dry holly-leaves,
And your soul wail with liars and thieves.”

“You bold young bastard, what’s this prattle?

I'm ready if you want a battle;

Let's fight, and wrestle for a fall,

And even if you win the brawl,

You will cry uncle, never fear.

But if you get a hold down here,

There's babyfat so fresh and nice,

You never dreamed such paradise;

And then, my boy, you'll bless the one

Who bore you, making you a man."

3.27 "HEY, BEAUTIFUL!"

"Beauty by the flowerbed,
Head up like a thoroughbred,
Hear what I have got to say:
If I catch you, caught you'll stay.

I have got a heavy jones,
I've a yen to jump your bones,
Pink cheeks, breasts as white as snow,
Two big handfuls, just like so,
Damned if I will let them go!"
"Suck my white tits, young Sir Randy?
You'd go crazy, like they're brandy,
Kill somebody, like enough,
Then go home to sleep it off."

"I'd kill twenty, literally,
Just to lie upon your belly—
Where'd you get those cheeks I see?"
"Almighty God gave them to me,
Given me by God Almighty:

Partly fat and partly meaty,
Partly muscle, partly fatty,
Just to please my latest sweetie,
Just to keep my lover happy—
But he must be young and peppy,
So that when I hear his call,
I will let my dinner fall,
I will leave my own grave-dust
To be the roadmap of his chest—
But I hope we will both die
On the same night, you and I;
And we'll lie there, grave by grave—
Who needs Heaven if you've love?"

MARRIAGE SONGS

3.28 TO THE BRIDE

Bridey, bridey, sweet and coy,
Mount the pony,
Bear a boy,
Name him Paladin, for joy.
Like the paladin of Hoti,
To God's vow he'll be devoted;
Like the paladin of Grudë,
He'll be brave and wise and good;
Like the paladin of Kelmend,
Harvest legends without end;
Like the paladin of Kastrat,
You'll find nobody like that;
Like the paladin of Shkrel,
Trickier than sprites from Hell!

3.29 THE COCK AND THE BRIDE

Milorad of Montenegro
And a girl from Sarajevo
Were in marriage to be tied:
Lovely Etleva, the bride.
But she loved another man:
Gjergji the Albanian.
He had sworn upon his life
He would have no other wife.
There was endless bitter strife,
Loaded musket, whetted knife.
Both sides reached agreement then,
To take it to the wise old men.
Alban, Montenegrin sages
Gathered, seasoned by the ages;
It was given them to decide
Who should best deserve the bride.
Old man Kasel, that wise fox,
Said "It can be solved with cocks.
Go, young men--and heed my words—
Home and fetch your fighting birds.

He whose cock will win the fight
Gets the girl as his by right."
Milos' cock was speckled gray,
Gjergji's red and black, they say.
They fight cruelly, eye to eye,
Head to head, to kill or die.
Red-and-black will win the fight;
Gjergji gets the girl that night.

3.30 SHE WHISPERS TO HER LOVER

"So many groomsmen, what a to-do!"

"I hope they brought some singers too."

"They'll make me sing, but what I'll do

Is sing and dance, my love, for you."

They start the feasting right away,

Three whole sets the band must play

Until "it's time for bed!" they say.

"Three years he hasn't shaved, the clown.

The filthy beggar tickles me,

His hand creeps up upon my knee,

He tries a love-bite then, the swine—

I kicked him where the sun don't shine.

He cracked his head on the chiffonniers,

But now his mother overhears.

That black bride, what is she doing?—

I paid three thousand for her wooing.

It's almost day, and now she's moaning,

Says she's sick, can't move for groaning—

So I say "Come sit by the fire

Where the light's a little higher,

Let me read your rosary.
If my bride should die, why, we
Are ruined, house and family."
She drags me by my amulet
To the hearth where fire is set.
"Wake up, Hajj, read her beads for me,
Lest she die and ruin me!"
"Wake up yourself, any fool can see
Without the beads just why she moans.
Lust has got into her bones,
White face, black eyes, how she yearns;
It is for a boy she burns."
May the Hajj catch all diseases,
Let him be whom our sickness seizes!
What he wants is what I've got,
And he'll surely get it—not!

3.31 POOR HYSEN

Creditors have all come calling,
He’s sold his goats, both kids and dams;
He’s sold his cows, their calves a-bawling,
He’s sold his sheep, he’s sold their lambs:
There’s nothing left, unless he’d rather
Sell his mother and his father.
He’ll avenge this bloody spending;
Indeed he will, and no pretending:
“Right. I’m going to the market.”
When he got into the market
He put the word out far and wide:
He is there to sell his bride.
There he meets a smart young dandy
Seems to find the offer handy:
“What’s the price for her, my man?”
—Words that cut as word well can.
“My wife will cost three hundred ducats.”
Hand goes quickly to his pockets,
Finds in there three hundred ducats,
Gets his bride and home he goes.

What grand wedding now he throws!
But when bed-time came, and they
Touched each other's flesh, the sky
Curdled in a bloody whey
With the frown of God above.
To the window flew a dove:
Told him "All these signs of doom
Pale before what is to come:
Your own mother bore your bride."
Twice the young man died inside;
Now to comfort him, she tried
Questioning him of his mother:
"Poor man, did you have a sister?"
"Wretched girl, had you a brother?"
"I left behind a little brother
With a birthmark like a blister
On his forehead, from his mother."
Lightning-fast, he fetched a light,
Raised his cap to show the sight:
There the mark was, red and white.
So embracing, they begin
To weep the fate that made them kin.

3.32 MARTA GOSSIPS

Marta tells the girls that please her:
“Poor wife saddled with a geezer.
Daddy wed me to this oldie,
Buried me alive with Moldy.
Nothing’s worse than when you face
Death’s-head by the fireplace.
Sixty years went to create
Gray-bush beard and barren pate.
Drool is all he gives, or worse:
Daddy, here’s a daughter’s curse.”

SPELLS, CHARMS, AND GAMES

3.33 A CHARM AGAINST SNAKEBITE

Gospod Pusi called a wedding,

So he sent for Gospod Peri:

“Hold this wedding ceremony,

Let there be no wicked bride,

Let there be a virtuous bride,

May the snake die of her beauty,

May her goodness heal the sting.”

Tph, tph, tph...

3.34 SONG OF THE SALT

(A divination ritual, in which the diviner sprinkles salt on his palm, then takes two hairs from his client's head, crosses them over the salt, and then places over them a coin taken at random by the client from his pocket (which will be the diviner's fee). The diviner then squeezes his hand, blows on the contents, and reads the shapes suggested by the salt. The "whoo" sound in the poem represents the blowing.)

Whoo, whoo, black bear,
Whoo, whoo, white bear.
Whoo, spellbinder,
Earthborn pixie,
Water-nixie,
May the weak mind
And the strong mind
Melt in songlines,
Where is healing,
There is fortune.
Whoo, whoo, whoo!

3.35 CURING A BUNION

North wind blow and crack the sky,
What was seen be seen no more;
White shades chase the gods on high,
Blistered are their heels so sore,
Gods' hands now as feet must tread—
Where has all the gods' power fled?
In between the warp-threads that
Rule the fabric of the mat
That was pulled by evil hate
From beneath your proper fate.
Dark northwind blow sky to ice,
Gods for you make sacrifice;
Hands are hands now, and not feet,
Feet, not hands, now serve as feet.
Now the gods' powers are a knife
Cutting out the bunion's life,
Digging out the evil eyes,
So they cannot see to rise.

3.36 HOST AND GUEST

(an "Icicle Song," improvised response poem)

Host:

Welcome friends and god-kin dear,
I rejoice that you are here;
Take your merry ease tonight,
No scale will measure our delight.

Guest:

Icicle song in its first pressing:
Honor to you, our host, and blessing,
Never may your table cease
To flow with gifts, soul of Malësisë.

Host:

I saved the grape of the southward hill,
And brewed it in my finest still,
Aged it, drew it, for cordial good,
From the cask of mulberry wood.

Guest:

You always had the ancient grace
To nurture noble words and ways,
Gave your guests kindly courtesy:
God grant your fields fertility!

3.37 HAT SONG

(an "Icicle Song," improvised by the winning team to the losers of the Hat Game)

At start of play when down I sat
Among ten hats I hid my nut;
You picked the first and picked in vain,
Picked up the second—wrong again.

To seek a nut's too deep for you:
Acorns are all you ever knew;
You rummage barren leaves but find
Nothing, with your toplofty mind.

One hundred points, and now it's two:
What kind of hobgoblins are you?
You'll never win by guessing it:
So may your hands turn all to shit!

LULLABIES

3.38 NINA-NANA, MY FATIME

Nina-nana baby don't weep,
I want Fatime to fall asleep.

Come now sleep without delay,
Come and take Fatime your way.

Sleep, sleep the little birds call,
Fatime's eyes don't blink at all.

When the birds of peace came by,
They asked Fatime not to cry.

Now sleepiness has hugged her tight,
And Fatime's eyes have waved good night.

3.39 NINA-NANA, MY ONLY BOY

Nina-nana, my only boy,
Thank God
For this great joy.

Nina-nana, my true treasure,
Your sleepy eyes
Such a pleasure.

Nina-nana, my only son,
Rocking your cradle
So much fun.

Nina-nana, my real daylight,
Your softening eyelids
Greatest delight.

3.40 NINA-NANA, BABY GIRL

Nina-nana, baby girl,
Baby girl,
Mom and Daddy cherish you,
Cherish you.

Nina-nana, baby girl,
Baby girl,
You're the newest shining moon,
Shining moon.

Nina-nana, baby girl,
Baby girl,
All of Malësia welcomes you,
Welcomes you.

Nina-nana, baby girl,
Baby girl,
You're the purest mountain dew,
Mountain dew.

Nina-nana, baby girl,

Baby girl,

The whole wide world's adoring you,

Adoring you.

Nina-nana, baby girl,

Baby girl,

You're the very brightest sunray,

Brightest sunray.

Nina-nana, sleep-y girl,

Sleep-y girl,

Now enjoy your sweet dreams,

Sweeeeet dreams.

3.41 NINA-NANA, MY SICK CHILD

Nina-nana,
My dearest child,
Nina-nana-o.

I pray
That you'll get better,
Nina-nana-o.

Mother shall
Always help you,
Nina-nana-o.

Get well
Beat this fever,
Nina-nana-o.

Grow wings
Become an eagle,
Nina-nana-o.

Drop sickness

Far off on Mount Veleçik,

Nina-nana-o.

Return home

With the spring,

Nina-nana-o.

DANCE SONGS

3.42 THE WAR DANCE

O, Albania, bride on top of the cliffs,
You go to battles as if they were weddings.
The world wonders about your gunshots:
"Are they the groomsmen's or the bride's?"

In the weddings and the wars
Together stand those lutes and guns of yours.
When loud your "Liberty or Death" will peal,
The bride leads her groomsmen to the ordeal.

3.43 THE MILKING DANCE

Mother in law went to milk the cows,
Dragging-e, dragging-o,
Daughter in law went to help her,
Bouncing-e bouncing -o.
Mother in law went to milk the sheep,
Dragging-e, dragging-o,
Daughter in law is going to help her,
Bouncing-e bouncing-o,
Mother in law went to milk the goats,
Dragging-e, dragging-o,
Daughter in law is going to help her,
Bouncing-e Bouncing-o.

3.44 THE HANDKERCHIEF OF THE BACHELOR DANCE

Wash, beauty, wash
    that bachelor's handkerchief.

Wring, beauty, wring
    that bachelor's handkerchief.

Dry, beauty, dry
    that bachelor's handkerchief.

Let go, beauty let go,
    that bachelor's handkerchief.

Burn, beauty, burn
    that bachelor's handkerchief.

3.45 THE MEADOW DANCE

We have roosters:

Yah-a!

We have no chicks:

Hop-a!

Put, put your foot forward-o,
I give you my hat-o.

Roll, roll your belly-o,
I give you my wallet-o.

Soften, soften your knees-o,
I give you my watch-o.

Stretch, stretch your arms-o,
I give you my lute-o.

Lift, lift your hips-o,
I give you my revolver-o.

Shimmy, shimmy your shoulders-o,

I give you my white-horse-o.

Nod, nod at me-o,

I give you my heart-o.

Hop-a, hop-a yah-a!

HYMNS AND RITUALS

3.46 THE BIRTHDAY OF SAINT NICHOLAS

Wise and learned this fair morn,
Here Saint Nicholas was born:
Three weeks nothing, day and night,
Passed his lips, poor little wight,
Since at mother’s breast he fed:
Mother, father, both are dead.
All their flocks and goods remain:
Who will keep them for him then?

They’ll be guarded by the poor:
All who rise at dawn footsore,
Toil to earn a bite for pay
Go to church this holy day,
Where they will rejoice, because
They’re blessing baby Santa Claus.

Who is he, we do not know,

That he should on us bestow

All his riches and his treasure,

Ark of blessings beyond measure,

That's inscribed with: FOR THE POOR:

May God bless him always, for

He is the fair saint of light.

But we are in such a plight!

Wilting as the lily will,

Weeping willow on the rill,

Bending as the willow arches,

Overwhelmed with so much riches.

It's too much for us, although

We're the poorest folk we know;

We'll just leave the rich ark be,

So that one more poor than we

In worldly goods or holy spirit

May its sacred wealth inherit—

And that our Saint Nicholas,

Saint of light, remain with us.

Amen.

3.47 THE BLESSED VIRGIN

Mary comes to our relief,
In her arms an olive-sheaf;
Heaven’s eyelids open, where
Every olive is a star.
Night and day, our souls to save,
Jesus quakes all through his cave;
Now the stars fall from their height,
Village turns to city bright—
What to do with all this light?
On the offshoot the bulbul sings:
Sleep, if you can’t hear these things.
Are you of the day or night?
Choose the darkness or the light.

3.48 TO THE CHRISTIAN PRIEST

You, the Christian priest,
Are being called by old graves,
Those old graves
Among which lie also our Albanians.

Give your blessing to everybody
But also to those old Albanians;
Let everybody hear your blessing,
Because we all respect the Mother of God.

3.49 EIGHT BAD EGGS

My Muslim child,

My only son,

Eight years old,

Ate eight bad eggs,

Given by your good hearts

In this good Easter Day.

Now

His heart has stopped;

He is facing the God we share,

.

My only son.

Killed.

Not by your good Easter

Not by your good hearts

But by

Eight awful eggs!

3.50 CONFESSION TO GOD

God,

I'm the space that

Can't be filled without you.

A headless body,

A mad beast,

A lifeless creation;

That's what I'm

Without You.

Without You

I am a burning Cross

On the grave of your symbols.

With You,

I survive

Like the people's trust in You:

I'm not so sure that I'm real or not.

That's where I reluctantly cross You.

Is that why I ended up being

Your unprotected creature;

Your condemned outdoor prisoner;

A paradigm of your power to punish?

God, forgive me God,

If my true confession

Was a bad idea.

Amen.

3.51 LAMENT FOR PRENG GRUDA

Preng, son of Gjon, what grief is here?
What a crowd attends your bier?
HEIA!
Mountain birds ask shriekingly:
Lord, what is this tragedy?
HEIA!
Gruda's son in exile dead,
This day dawned with him, and fled;
Now his line is waste and blind,
No son or daughter left behind.
HEIA!

But he leaves his history,
Spread Albania far and free;
Malësisë' great ones on this day
Mourn Preng Gruda, passed away;
All night within these frontiers grieve
Those to whom his help he gave,
None here passed a night unless
He had helped them in distress.

HEIA!

Every child that God gives here,
When he’s reached his thirteenth year,
Left his crib, and learned to speak,
Then his father he will seek,
Asks permission if he may
Into exile pass away.
Friendless in the world he’d roam:
With Preng Gruda found a home,
Food, and fire, and honor found,
Someone in a far cold land
Who could hear their voice and tongue,
Homesick, struggling, and young.
No-one, Preng, you turned away,
All who knocked your door could stay,
You would never hide nor shun,
But were friend to everyone.
HEIA!

Education was your rule,
All your kin must go to school;

All Malësisë has felt your aid,
For you loved your Tring and Dedë,
Dearly loved your Kol and Gjokë,
Though far, would not forget your folk:
See these Albanians from Detroit
Come back to mourn you at your feet.
HEIA!

Black blazes there the house of stone;
Who takes the dark gift? God alone.
God made men worthy of their death:
The bird that is the spirit’s breath
Has flown away from its last home,
Beats with its wings the winds of fame.
For he was born a great-souled one,
A writer, scholar, muses’-son,
And knew to question us, that we
Might learn to judge as well as he.
HEIA!

O Preng, may then the good muse bless
Your written words with deathlessness,

That what you wrote outlast the page,

For words set out before the age

Of paper, and will come to land

Beyond it, as my lines now stand.

HEIA!

God help us once, and always will;

May you, your words, remain so still

With Him, as these great mountains will.

HAI! HEIA!

PHILOSOPHY

3.52 LET YOUR WORK BE WELL OR ILL…

Let your work be well or ill,
Criticisms will assail it:
Expectation’s cruel knell,
Words as sharp as knives will hail it.

Since this life was first devised,
Though it last without an ending,
Whose work was not criticized,
All its beauty notwithstanding?

In each human heart there wakes
Swiftly that innate reaction:
Even God’s sky shrinks and shakes,
Pelted from each new direction.

Joined at birth with mortal man
Comes ambition’s desert spirit:

If you have it, no-one can
Rest until the burial pit.

Criticism when it grows
Limp, unfounded, like the grasses,
Shatters the morale of those
Who inspire our human masses.

Critics, like the ocean wave,
Should not damage one’s aspiring—
Thus the truly strong and brave
Work despite them, still untiring.

If you’d be life’s critic true,
Beauty’s deep roots you must find:
Otherwise your rantings do
But throw pebbles at the wind.

3.53 WHAT IS WITHIN A MAN

Mountain peak with forests high,
Over them a star-filled sky.
Sky's belly and the high peaks clear
Clasp a space, an empty sphere,
Where, between, in bubble form,
Songs are pricked, and burst in storm,
Sound now like a rushing flume,
Now like terror's frozen tomb,
Now, love's melody that plays
Over the ribcage of the days;
And this warm breath, like a steam,
Fills the sphere with hope and dream.
So of God the inner man
Prays to be remade again,
Asks that He come down to earth,
Give our mothers second birth;
Without You, we're men with wings,
Frozen midair, like unborn things.

CHAPTER 4

THE RECORDINGS

HOMAGE TO THE WARRIORS

was performed by Fran Zef Therçaj (1918-1996). The poem comes to us as a private recording by his son Tom Therçaj, a prominent journalist who works for the State Television of Albania, TVSH.

THE EAGLE OF ALBANIA

was performed by Noc Tom Dedaj and recorded in Koplik, on May 26, 2006 by Gjeke Marinaj.

THE PLEDGE OF THE HILL

was performed by Resmie Siqeca and recorded in Vlorë, on June 2, 2006 by Gjeke Marinaj.

IN THE MOUNTAINS OF TARAMIS

was performed by Nik Palok Marinaj and recorded in Richardson, Texas, on June 11, 2008 by Gjeke Marinaj.

MY HOME VILLAGE

was performed by Klarko Koçi and recorded in Porto Palermo, Vlorë, on June 2, 2006 by Gjeke Marinaj.

MILKING-TIME

was performed by Pashko Gjekaj and recorded in Vukpalaj, Bajzë, on June 5, 2006 by Gjeke Marinaj.

CHEESE

was performed by Pashko Gjekaj and recorded in Vukpalaj, Bajzë, on June 5, 2006 by Gjeke Marinaj.

BUTTER

was performed by Pashko Gjekaj and recorded in Vukpalaj, Bajzë, on June 5, 2006 by Gjeke Marinaj.

SHEPHERD'S SONG

was performed by Dakë Keqaj and recorded in Peraj, Bajzë, on June 5, 2006 by Gjeke Marinaj.

THE PROUD ROOSTER

was performed by Zef Leka and recorded in Ndrecaj, Bajzë, on May 29, 2006 by Gjeke Marinaj.

DEDË LUL TOMA

was performed by Gjok Gojçaj and recorded in Detroit, Michigan, on October 25, 2008 by Gjeke Marinaj.

KOLË'S PEERLESS WOMEN

was performed by Nik Palok Marinaj and recorded in Richardson, Texas, on June 12, 2008 by Gjeke Marinaj.

YLBER

was performed by Fran Zef Therçaj (1918-1996). The poem comes to us as a private recording by his son Tom Therçaj.

WORD SPREADS IN ISTANBUL

was performed by the epic poet Jonuz Delaj and recorded in Koplik, on June 5, 2006 by Gjeke Marinaj.

ZEK JAKINI

was performed by Jaho Margjeka and recorded in Tirana, on June 4, 2006 by Gjeke Marinaj.

SUNG ACROSS THE SHOULDER

was performed by Pjetër Gjokë Kodra and recorded in Koplik, on June 4, 2006 by Gjeke Marinaj.

THE MARRIAGE OF HAJKUNA

was performed by Nik Palok Marinaj and recorded in Richardson, Texas, on June 19, 2008 by Gjeke Marinaj.

MUJI AND THE THREE WITCHES

was performed by Prof. Lesh Rushaj and recorded in Rome on May 23, 2006 by Gjeke Marinaj.

"SWEET, WHERE WERE YOU LINGERING?"

was performed by Lush Vukelaj and recorded in Koplik on May 29, 2006 by Gjeke Marinaj.

"WHERE SHALL WE MEET?"

was performed by Pjetër Gjokë Kodra and recorded in Koplik on May 29, 2006 by Gjeke Marinaj.

BEAUTY WITH A WHITE SHAWL

was performed by Lush Vukelaj and recorded in Koplik on May 29, 2006 by Gjeke Marinaj.

"MILLER, MILLER"

was performed by Pjetër Gjokë Kodra and recorded in Koplik on May 29, 2006 by Gjeke Marinaj.

TWO BEAUTIES

was performed by Zef Marinaj and recorded in Koplik on May 30, 2006 by Gjeke Marinaj.

BEAUTY AT THE DOOR

was performed by Prof. Lesh Rushaj and recorded in Rome on May 23, 2006 by Gjeke Marinaj.

"HEY, GIRL"

was performed by Prof. Lesh Rushaj and recorded in Rome on May 23, 2006 by Gjeke Marinaj.

HEY, BEAUTIFUL"

was performed by Dakë Keqaj and recorded in Peraj, Bajzë, on Junë 3, 2006 by Gjeke Marinaj.

TO THE BRIDE

was performed by Luxhe Gjeloshja and recorded in Koplik on May 30, 2006 by Gjeke Marinaj.

THE COCK AND THE BRIDE

was performed by Noc Tom Dedajand recorded in Koplik on May 30, 2006 by Gjeke Marinaj.

SHE WHISPERS TO HER LOVER

was performed by Vera Zef Kodra and recorded in Koplik on May 30, 2006 by Gjeke Marinaj.

POOR HYSEN

was performed by Jaho Margjeka and recorded in Tirana, on June 4, 2006 by Gjeke Marinaj.

MARTA GOSSIPS

was performed by Vera Zef Kodra and recorded in Koplik on May 30, 2006 by Gjeke Marinaj.

A CHARM AGAINST SNAKEBITE

was performed by Zef Marinaj and recorded in Koplik on May 30, 2006 by Gjeke Marinaj.

SONG OF THE SALT

was performed by Zef Marinaj and recorded in Koplik on May 30, 2006 by Gjeke Marinaj.

CURING A BUNION

was performed by Luxhe Gjeloshja and recorded in Koplik on May 30, 2006 by Gjeke Marinaj.

HOST AND GUEST

was performed by Dedë Shtëpija and recorded in New York on November 30, 2010 by Gjeke Marinaj.

HAT SONG

was performed by Dedë Shtëpija and recorded in New York on November 30, 2010 by Gjeke Marinaj.

THE BIRTHDAY OF SAINT NICHOLAS

was performed by Luxhe Gjeloshja and recorded in Koplik on May 30, 2006 by Gjeke Marinaj.

THE BLESSED VIRGIN

was performed by Vera Zef Kodra and recorded in Koplik on May 30, 2006 by Gjeke Marinaj.

TO THE CHRISTIAN PRIEST)

Dr. Miodrag Radulovacki contributed to this book by performing this poem passed down to him by his grandfather, Stevan Loš (1890-1943).

LAMENT FOR PRENG GRUDA

was performed by one of the women lamenters who, as the tradition has it, never introduced herself.

LET YOUR WORK BE WELL OR ILL…

was performed by Zef Leka and recorded in Ndrecaj, Bajzë, on May 29, 2006 by Gjeke Marinaj.

WHAT IS WITHIN A MAN

was performed by Resmie Siqeca and recorded in Vlorë, on June 2, 2006 by Gjeke Marinaj.

CHAPTER 5

THE ORAL POETS AND PERFORMERS

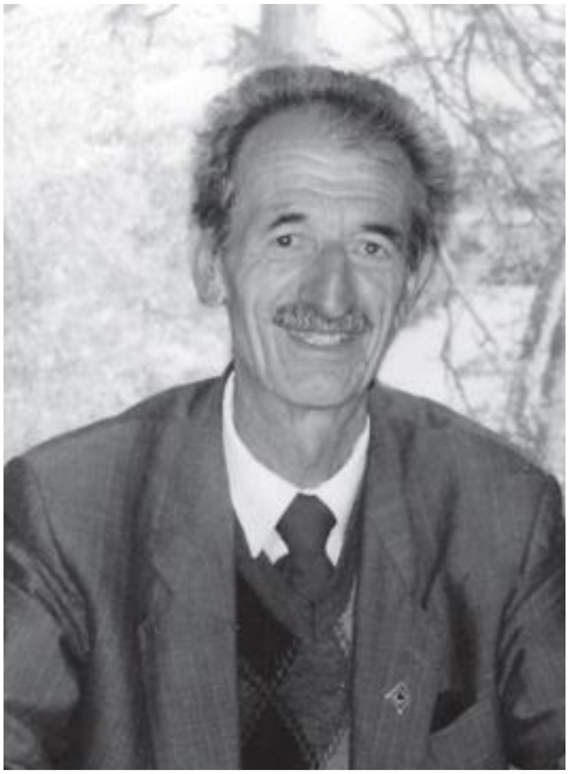

Figure 5.1 Noc Tom DEDAJ

Noc Tom Dedaj is a school teacher and a supporter of epic poetry and epic poets. Born in the village of Shkrel, Albania, in 1945, Dedaj is among very few people of that background who has a University level education. He is now retired and enjoys spending time in his private studio reading.

Figure 5.2 Jonuz DELAJ

Born in Nikç, Kelmend, Albania, in 1950, Jonuz Delaj is a professional lahutar (lutenist) and a well-known epic poet in composition and performance. He has performed in numerous national (Albanian) and international folk festivals and concerts with outstanding success. Even though his twelfth grade level education is not related to music, this self-taught artist is a top ten epic performer not only in Albania but anywhere Albanian communities reside.

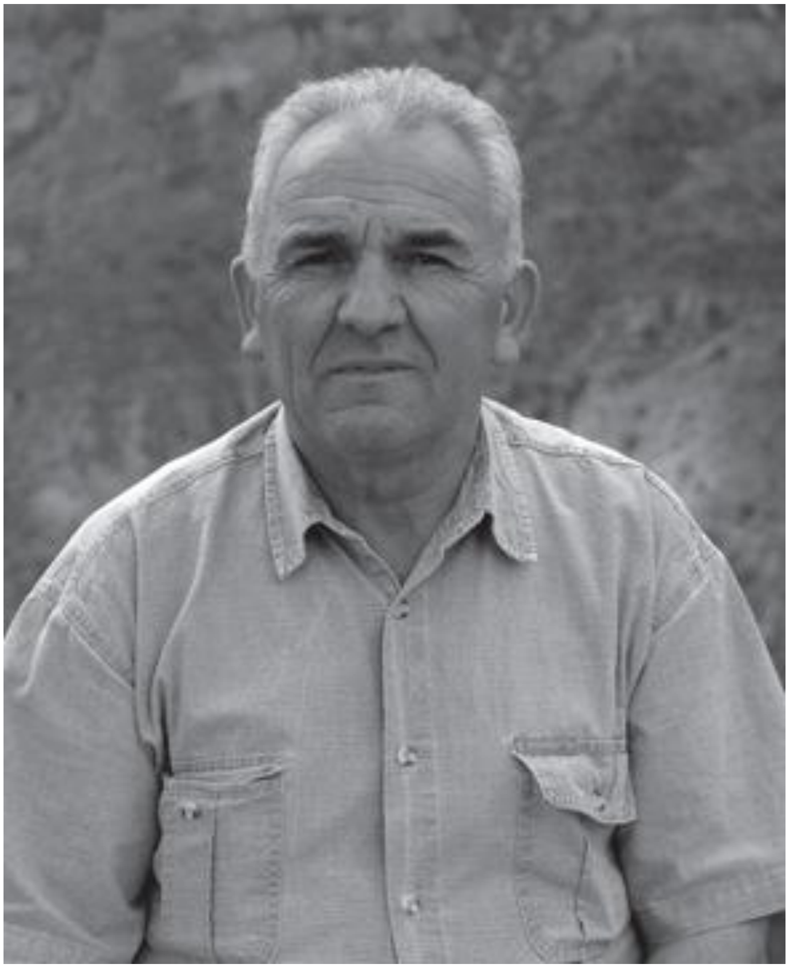

Figure 5.3 Pashko GJEKAJ

A cultural director and a theatrical performer, Pashko Gjekaj was born in Pjetroshan, Albania, in 1946. He made a name for himself as an arts academician who utilized his university level training to bring the artistic environment of Malësia e Madhe to a higher level. Gjekaj is regarded by his peers as an innovator who takes concrete steps toward the promotion of artistic activities and cultural reform. Epic and folk poetry have always been his passion.

Figure 5.4 Luxhe GJELOSHJA

Once a farmer and now a housewife, Luxhe Gjeloshja was born in Shkrel, Malësia e Madhe, in 1941. After completing her fourth grade of education, she developed an interest in epic poetry, especially religious and love songs. Although she has never performed in public, she never hesitates to recite them in private when asked to do so.

Figure 5.5 Gjok GOJÇAJ with wife Djella

Gjok Gojçaj (1914-2010) worked as a mason from his youth until his retirement. Born and raised in Skorraq-Hot, Montenegro, Gojçaj kept alive his family tradition by being honorable, brave and generous, making his home and hospitality available to all friends and neighbors, including strangers in need. Gjok was survived by his wife Djellë Gojçaj (above) and their children, who now live in Detriot, Michigan.

Figure 5.6 Dakë KEQAJ

Dakë Keqaj is the author of several volumes of poetry and is widely acknowledged as one the best poets of Malësia e Madhe. He was a fan-favorite athlete in his early twenties, working for the state of Albania as a health inspector until the fall of communism in 1991. Now he enjoys his retirement; occasionally he prefers to help out the local television stations of Malësia e Madhe with their programming needs. Keqaj continues to write poetry as well.

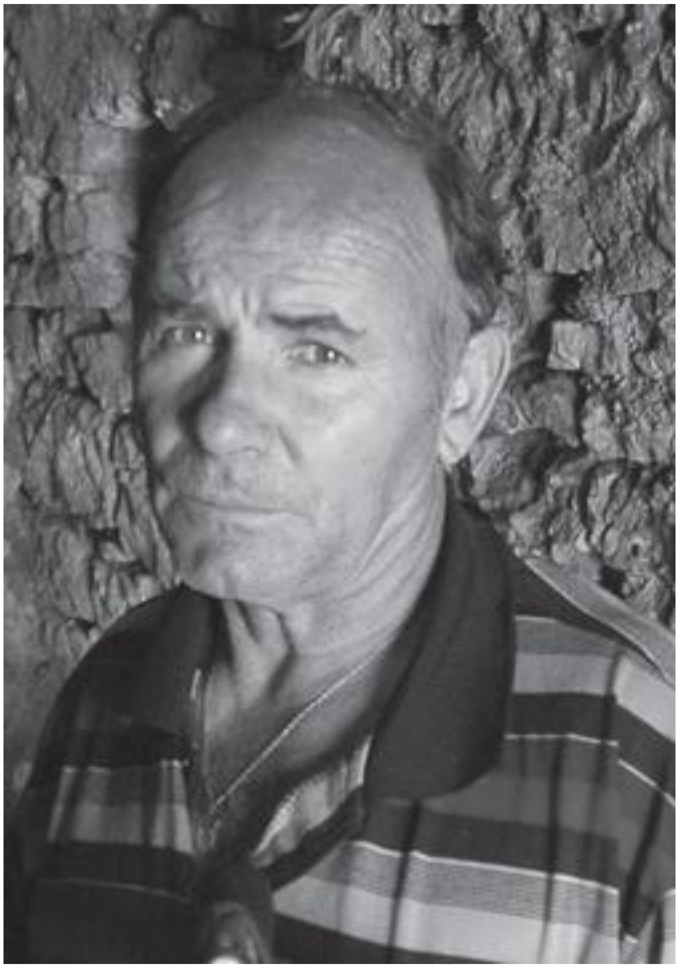

Figure 5.7 Klarko KOÇI

Klarko Koçi was born in Qeparo, Albania, in 1944. Soon after earning his high school diploma, Koçi started working as a laborer and continued doing so until recently. Now he is a castle docent at Ali Pasha Tepelena’s castle, located in Porto Palermo, Albania.

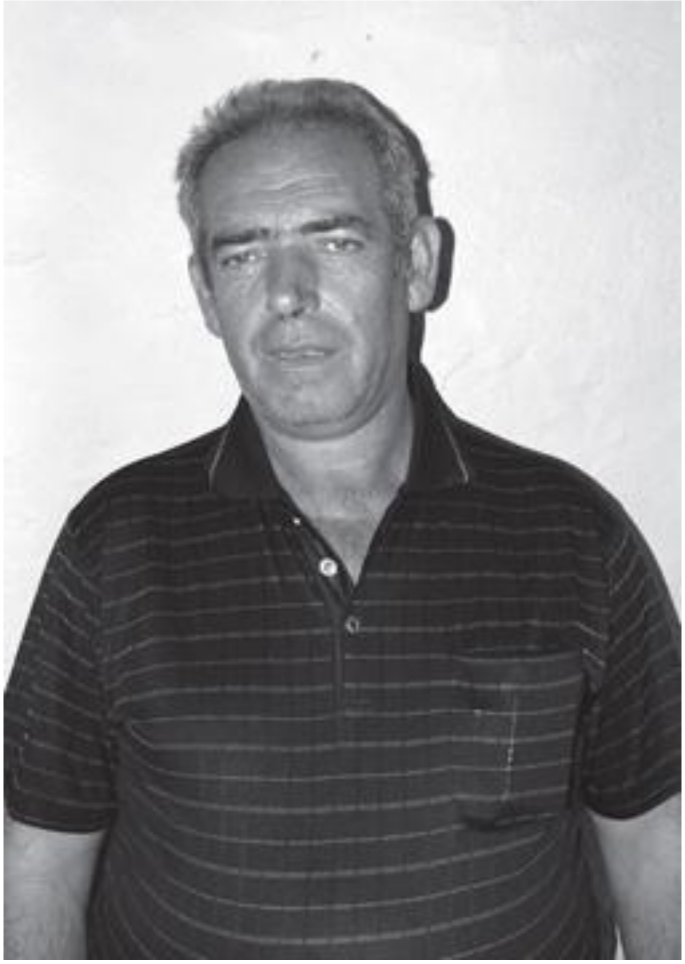

Figure 5.8 Pjeter Gjokë KODRA

When Pjeter Gjoke Kodra, a laborer, moved from Shalë-Dukagjin, Albania, where he was born in1959, to Koplik (the only city in the district of Malësia e Madhe), all he had to offer to his new neighbors was his physical strength, his eighth grade education and an enormous love for epic poetry. Yet that was all he needed to earn their respect and enjoy his own way of life in the small northern Albanian city where he lives with his wife Vera and their children

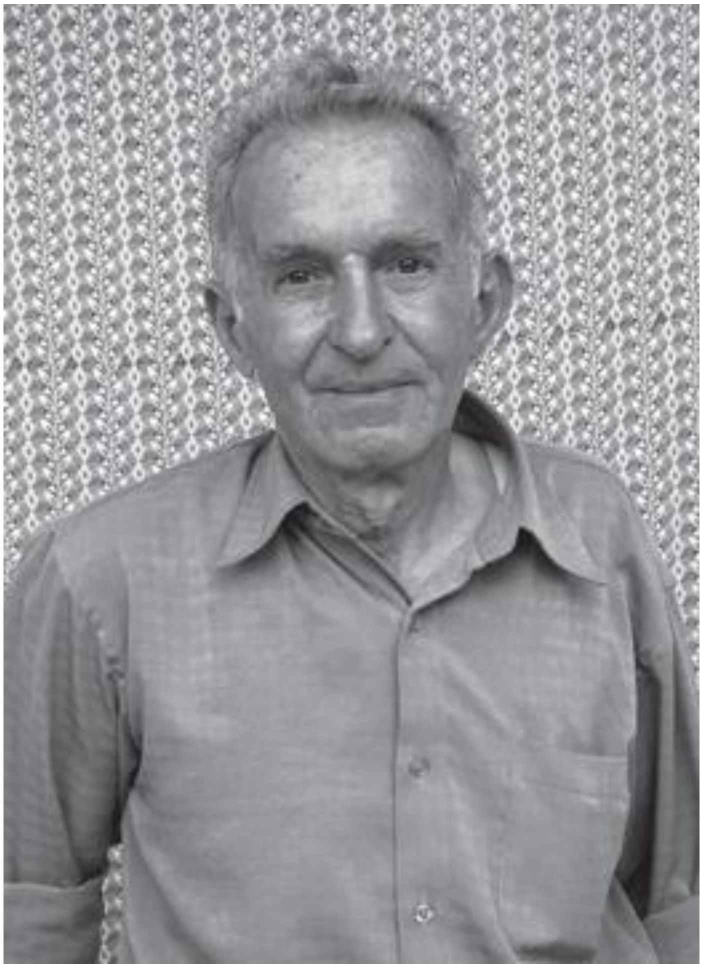

Figure 5.9 Zef LEKA

Zef Leka was born Bajzë, Albania, in 1935. With only an eighth grade education he managed to find employment as the only Public Registrar of the entire Malësia e Madhe district, a job he loved for over 40 years. Although he never published any of his own work, Leka never lost his passion for epic poetry. His main goal in life was to support his children in getting their advanced university degrees, and he takes great pride in achieving it.

Figure 5.10 Jaho Salih MARGJEKA

Jaho Salih Margjeka was born in Bujan, Tropojë, Albania, in 1961. He graduated from the University of Tirana, with a degree in Albanian language and literature, in 1989. Margjeka has authored several volumes of poetry and prose for which he has been honored with numerous literary awards and cultural recognitions. Margjeka is currently a senior journalist for Radio Tirana

Figure 5.11 Nik Palok MARINAJ

Nik Palokë Marinaj (the father of Gjeke Marinaj), was born in Brrut, Malësia e Madhe, Albania, in 1939. An optimist at heart, he never complains about the extremely difficult conditions in which he raised and educated his seven children. As a lifelong farmer, whenever he would set aside his mattock and shovel he would pick up his *lahutë* or *çifteli* to entertain himself and his family. His fourth grade level of education enabled him to write down hundreds of folk and epic songs before he learned them by heart.

Figure 5.12 Zef MARINAJ

Zef Marinaj, whose lifelong career as warehouse director, first in Zagora and later in Koplik, made him a prominent man for helping everyone who asked for his aid with government supplies, was born in Kastrat, Albania, in 1937. Regardless of his eighth grade education, many people consider him to be a wise man not only for managing to do that without being imprisoned but also for his great talent at composing and interpreting proverbs and anecdotes. He is the most acclaimed man in Malësia e Madhe.

Figure 5.13 Marash MARKU

A humble farmer, with only a first grade level of education, Marash Marku (1926-2010) knew by heart over 500 epic songs. Born and raised in Brrut, Malësia e Madhe, Albania, Marku moved to Bajzë during his late fifties in search for a better life for his children Dilë, Llesh, Marie, Groshe, and Fran. He was a most knowledgeable person on the subject of the epic poetry of the Balkan states.

Figure 5.14 Lulash Nikë PALUSHAJ

A published poet and historian, Lulash Nikë Palushaj was born in Bekaj, Triesh, Montenegro, in 1944. He studied college level language and literature in Prishtina. Palushaj is also known for his contributions as a dance choreographer not only in Malësia e Madhe but also in the Albanian community in Detroit, Michigan, where he now lives with his family.

Figure 5.15 Dr. Miodrag RADULOVACKI

The 2010 UIC Inventor of the Year, Dr. Miodrag Radulovacki, is a Professor of Medicine at the University of Illinois at Chicago. Born in Hrtkovci (Screm), Serbia, 1933, Dr. Miodrag Radulovacki contributed to this dissertation by performing poetry passed down to him by his grandfather, Stevan Loš (1890-1943).

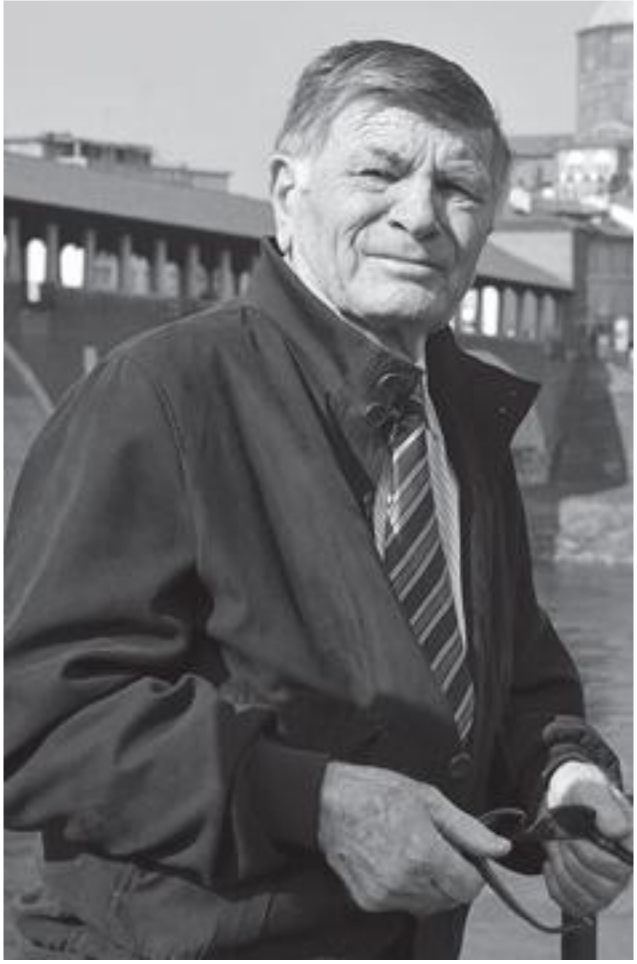

Figure 5.16 Llesh RUSHAJ

Llesh Rushaj, born in Bajzë, Kastrat (Albania) in 1943, started teaching Albanian language and literature immediately after graduating from college at what is now called “Dodë Kaçaj” High School. While keeping up with his professional duties as a popular teacher, he spent much of his free time collecting unpublished epic songs and studying the origin and the history of their words. While still an etymologist at heart, Rushaj is now retired and lives in Italy with his wife Vitore

Figure 5.17 Dedë SHTËPIJA

Dedë Shtëpija was born in Xhan, Dukagjin, Shkoder in 1938. He is well-known epic poetry performer on both instruments, the lahutë and the çifteli. A retired farmer, Shtëpija has an eighth grade level education. He is the author of one book of rhapsodic poetry.

Figure 5.18 Resmie SIQECA

Born in Vlorë, Albania in 1920, Resmie Siqeca has survived many dramatic political changes that Albania has been through, including World War II and over four decades of communist dictatorship. She knows many religious and patriotic poems by heart and performs them beautifully. The communist regime took everything away from her, including her daughter Burbuqe and her son-in-law Dalan Luzaj, who were banished from their village and isolated in a government controlled environment. Yet, her honest soul, her love for Islam, for her family, and for her epic poetry were hidden deeper than the communists could ever dig. Considering the circumstances, she is proud of her fourth grade level of educatio

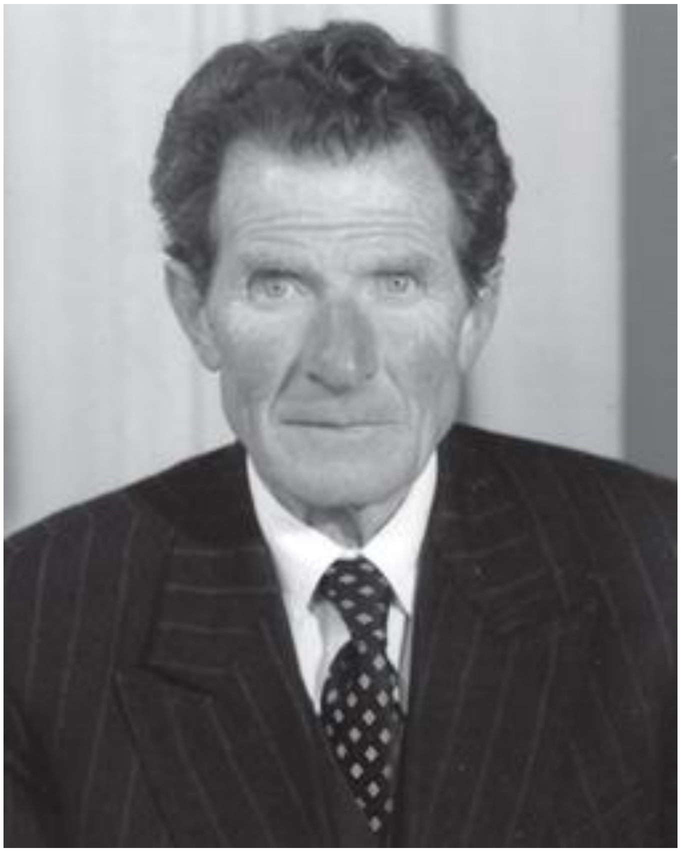

Figure 5.19 Fran Zef THERÇAJ

Fran Zef Therçaj (1918-1996) was born in Lukaj of Kastrat, Malësia e Madhe, Albania. He was a folk dancer and singer. His last public performance dates back to about six months before the diplomatic relations between Albania and former Federal Republic of Yugoslavia reached a virtual dead end. Before that time, he had been leading a group of folk entertainers who performed in the cities of Albania and its neighboring countries. He was much admired by the people of Malësia e Madhe. The poem comes to us as a private recording by his son Tom Therçaj, a prominent journalist who works for the State Television of Albania, TVSH.

Figure 5.20 Lush VUKELAJ

Farming was the only option Lush Gjelosh Vukelaj had to support his family. He lost favor with the communist government and suffered the consequences during his entire adult life. Only after his two sons Angjelin and Aleks managed to escape the authorities in 1990 to immigrate to America did his life gain some normalcy. Born in 1935, Gjeloshi lives in Shkrel, Albania, were he had initially earned his fourth grade education.

Figure 5.21 Vera ZEFI

Right after graduating from high school, Vera Zef Kodra started her career as a seamstress, a profession she loves and plans to keep until she decides to retire. She was born in Vukpalaj of Kastrat, in 1963, were she first started to learn by heart many of the long epic poems she knows and privately performs today.

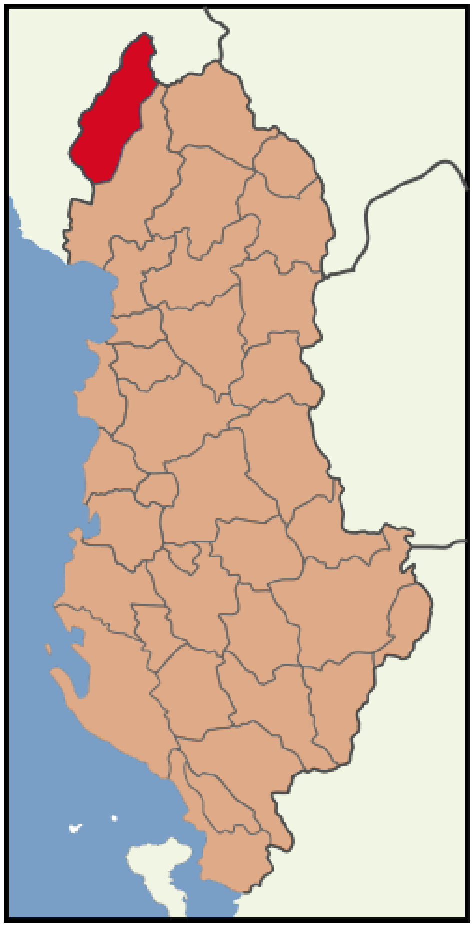

Figure 5.22 Map shows Malësia e Madhe: District within Albania[48]

[48] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Malesia_e_Madhe

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VITA

Gjeke Marinaj was born in 1965 in the Malësi e Madhe district of northern Albania. In August 1990, he published an anti-communist poem titled "Horses." Aware of his imminent arrest from the communist regime, on Sept. 12, 1990, he escaped authorities by illegally crossing the Albanian-Yugoslavian border and fled to the former Yugoslavia. He arrived in San Diego in July 1991, and moved to Texas later that year, where he gained bachelor's and master's degrees in literature. He is completing his PhD at The University of Texas at Dallas. He has edited more than a dozen books, translated four books of poetry, and published several collections of his own poetry and criticism. He is the recipient of the 2011 Albanian BookerMan Prize for Literature (not to be confused with The Man Booker Prize); the Pjetër Arbnori Prize for literature from QNK, part of the Albanian Ministry of Culture; and The Golden Pen from the Society of Albanian-American Writers in journalism for his book *The Other Side of the Mirror*. In 2001, he created the Society of Albanian-American Writers and began teaching at Richland College, where he continues to teach English and communication. He lives in Richardson with his wife Dusita.